

# Meniscus



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# Publication Information

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## About Meniscus

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Meniscus is a literary journal, published and supported by the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) with editors from the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand.

The title of the journal was the result of a visit made by two of the editors to the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, where James Turrell's extraordinary installation, 'Within without' (2010), led them to think about how surfaces, curves, tension and openness interact. In particular, they were struck by the way in which the surface of the water features, and the uncertainty of the water's containment, seems to analogue the excitement and anxiety inherent in creative practice, and the delicate balance between possibility and impossibility that is found in much good writing.

## Australian Copyright Agency

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Meniscus would like to acknowledge the generous support of the [Australian Copyright Agency's Cultural Fund](#).

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# Editorial

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This is our third anniversary edition and it's reassuring to see several of the writers who offered work in our first volume, August 2013, continuing to submit work to our online open access literary journal, in 2016. Despite the diversity of style and predominance of poetry once again in this issue, there's also a strong theme of place; emotional and physical locality, houses, countries, towns, and planes – watery, airy, eerie and earthbound – are explored.

In keeping with our original goals to become an international journal, we welcome yet more writers from North America and for the first time, Africa, to join the writers from the UK, Australia and New Zealand, in Volume 4 issue 2, in what can only be described as a bumper issue of 46 submissions. Particular thanks are due to Daniel Jukes who came on as editorial assistant and wrangled the many applications and the new format of *Submittable* with aplomb, and Paul Munden for his fine work as publishing editor.

In celebratory mode we are publishing some prizewinning work, from recent competitions. First the University of Canberra Health Poetry Prize, whose judges commented:

Three poems stood out as prizewinners. Third prize goes to Andy Jackson's poem, 'There was no consolation'. Its seemingly inconsolable title is countered by a poem that accumulates simple but intriguing detail, beautifully structured on the page.

Second prize goes to Sandra Renew for her prose poem, 'Mungo', a highly evocative piece of writing with some surprising shifts. Its telescopic movements reveal subtle understandings between human beings as a source of sustenance.

First prize is awarded to Shari Kocher for her poem, 'The Glimpse'. It moves with great economy from a sense of struggle to an embrace of the world, and with sensuous delight. Its increasingly richly textured language is precise while retaining a sense of the elusive.

Second, the AAWP's Emerging Writer's Prize, administered by Julia Prendergast, who writes:

The Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) together with the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival (UWRF) offers a prize for Emerging Writers of prose or poetry.

The 2016 competition theme was 'Tat Tvam Asi' which is a Hindu concept meaning 'I am you, you are me'. The nuanced and innovative responses to the theme made the judges' task extremely difficult. The overall quality of submissions was overwhelming. The AAWP would like to offer warm wishes to all writers for diverse and original contributions.

In this edition of *Meniscus* you will find the work of the inaugural winner: Annabel Wilson for 'Quire'. Annabel's entry was composed from journal entries based on her time in Ubud.

Annabel won a ticket to the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival (UWRF), accommodation for the duration of the festival and \$500 towards economy airfares. In addition, Annabel receives a one-year annual membership to the AAWP and fully

subsidised conference fees to attend the annual conference of the AAWP, where she is invited to read from her work.

The AAWP would like to thank Associate Professor Dominique Hecq and Professor Paul Hetherington for generously donating their time to judge the prize. Dominique Hecq had this to say of Annabel's work:

Although 'Quire' is referred to as a 'poem' in the body of the text, it defies generic conventions. It could equally be described as a narrative poem or an experimental fiction. It sets up a dynamic between the West and the East, the personal and the cultural, the concrete and the abstract. Apparently about a quest, the narrator's journey to Bali, it uses images of transit to mark out the scene and then proceeds to explore the hiatus between 'you' and 'me' and deftly arrives at the point where they meet. 'Quire' is compelling and haunting. It is also playful and linguistically inventive. With its cool tone and striking imagery, this work seems to me unostentatiously individual and ambitious—fastidious but also marked by unexpected images and turns. 'Quire' takes no short-cuts; it works always subtly and with its own particular combination of wryness and lyricism. It dramatises and performs the competition's theme.

The AAWP and UWRF are thrilled to support emerging writers through this initiative.

Warm wishes,  
Dr Julia Prendergast  
Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP)  
Postgraduate and Other Prizes

Congratulations to these winners. Your work truly deserves publication and we are honoured to be supporting you.

We continue to appreciate the contribution and support of the Australian Copyright Agency's Cultural Fund which has stipulated a new form of financial support, a prize for the top poetry and prose writers from each volume (2 issues, or one year) effective from April 2017. There will be more information about this and calls for further special issues on our website.

Gail Pittaway  
Meniscus Editors

# Shari Kocher

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## The Glimpse

*for P.D.*

To open into the day-wide-day, and find it wanting.  
To go out anyway, no small thing.  
To find, without looking, the whole day tossing

Its largeness from limb to limb, crying out *Look! Look!*  
To walk into that light and its musical river, to  
Touch, in particles of wood and water, its clamour

Which overnight has stormed a new rock pool  
That churns the infinite whirl to  
Quicksilver—the silent leap—a platypus

My human shadow casts its cold upon. To dive into  
Darkness—gone—the live wire of her wet surprise  
A song—articulate, intelligent—the lucent gift

The day gives anyway—its merry swish  
Hauling me up and over—bone flesh breath tripping  
At the speed of light through my spirit's sungate.

# Sandra Renew

---

## Mungo

since I have known the flat lands you came from I have wondered through winter nights what you want that keeps you there—forty thousand year old bones of the People, gathered through time as the lake edge moves, water turning to salt crust, wind creating dune from earth, paths through night-cold sand in desert scrub changing direction under footfalls without footprint—

wondered what silent, sacred knowledge bonds you to this dry earth, mined and tracked by bandicoots and tiny desert mice, echidna and dunnart

*smallest known mammalian Y chromosome  
in the body of a tiny mouse-sized marsupial*

those nights I wondered why the sigh when you pull up home in the rusted ute, kill the engine, sit with hands on wheel, hat pushed back and eyes reclaiming, after every trip to town, the horizon, and all country up to its haze and boundary...



# Andy Jackson

---

## There was no consolation

nothing that could be held  
in the mind or the hand.  
The shallow

leaf-washed creek flowed on.  
The steep gorge-side  
held thin eucalypts and fallen

boulders. The sun  
was everywhere. Around us,  
blue wrens hopped, almost

into our open hands.  
You brushed my arm, casually,  
tenderly. A strong wind

picked up and did not  
take any of this away.  
Still, the pain

dug further in, muttering  
in a language I could  
not comprehend –

And the birds, the birds  
kept feasting on insects  
too small to see.

## Some days come closer than others

In the courtyard, partly shaded  
from the high set summer sun  
after a night with friends  
verballing exits and executions  
and fallout from asylum seeking

after swirling spirit into couverture and cream  
mixing spices, mopping floors  
finding flowers, filling hours  
forsaking clothes for a mix 'n' match –  
he's such a catch - between the thighs

after a walk to and through  
the forest remnant of silver top ash  
pausing at the edge of Paton's Hill  
to eat bread and cheese and stare  
at the stretch of burning mist beyond

after rain the week ago  
and more on top of that  
after warmth and welcome growth  
so grass sprouts green  
above the paddock's dirty face

here, partly shaded in the courtyard  
while an espresso teases my senses,  
the poem in my head steps onto the page  
and the book in my hands takes me to France.  
Some days, some days come closer than others.

## Stillwater

*The old home has gone entirely. The mulberry tree set behind the kitchen... still lingers.*  
Miles Franklin diary entry. June, 1936.\*

**1894**

Wrung out by flood and drought,  
Franklin milks a handful of cows.

His first born, Stella Maria Sara Miles  
a sibilant promise in that name

chafes at life's leg rope  
takes to scribbling what she knows.

**1984**

Time that hid all trace  
now blows the house's cover

reveals depressions  
that shape four rooms.

Alien rocks confirm  
where the cookhouse chimney stood.

**2014**

Twice lightning-struck  
the mulberry's crumpled stump

kinks across then up  
to barely Stella's height.

Still fruits a few –  
sweet history on the tongue.

\* Paul Brunton (ed.) 2004, *The Diaries of Miles Franklin*

# K. M. Preston

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## Brookdale

I start with sheep dung, pungent and firm,  
strewn like black pearls across the fields  
and tenacious leeches that lurked in the creek,  
threatening to take all you had.

Stratus and wide cerulean panned my childhood retina.  
During the drought years, fingers of green algae  
caressed the creek's surface, but rain fell also,  
swelling the water, swamping the bridge.

Angus cows chequered the home pasture, and  
munched grass in wide-awake dreaming.  
Black snakes squatted in abandoned rabbit holes,  
like me inquisitive, like me easily scared.

A willow was a blanket across the water  
where the creek's bend had carved a quarry.  
There my sister and I skimmed stones in idle reverie  
or transfigured curls of bark into eucalyptus blue smoke.

Did I mention the steep hills?  
Acres of trees that oozed oxygen, while  
an unlikely spring, high up, flowed past the house  
at odd times of its own choosing.

The walk to the bus stop was true penance come summer.  
Fly-swatting, we traversed corrugated gullies  
that gave form to the memory of past rains  
while pink and brown dust added patina to our shoes.

When rains returned and gumboots were mocked  
my sister and I stayed at home, gratefully pleading flood  
and a father unable to deliver us dry to the bus stop  
having left early, moving to the rhythms of his farm.

A succession of dogs laboured under chromatic names,  
Spotty, Blacky, Darky, but always a Jack.  
The last, superfluous, consigned to a ten cent bullet,  
lives on in a single monochrome photograph.

Later a city doctor and his wife bought the property  
and grew peony roses near the creek.

## Vintage

It was different this year.  
Familiar things, once comforting,  
lay shrouded, as vines under Winter fog.  
Routine dragged at unthinking days,  
sleep more teasing than longed-for rain.

At the gabled store, sherry scents rise  
rich, replete and heady through the dust motes.  
His hand trails across wood, black metal banded.  
At the butt end he decrypts blue chalk glyphs  
and with colour swirling, draws forth a single glass.

He inhales carefully, consciously, critically,  
judging balance – the acid, the fruit, tannins,  
seeking in the mystery of wine  
some foundation that is less than truth  
but a single answer.

Absence stains his pores like vermillion,  
love ferments in his oak-barrelled heart.  
Does the vintage in some way reflect,  
or silently fail to mark,  
the hand that once co-laboured?

# Sandra Renew

---

## Top bloke

He was seen by a late night fisherman standing in a cloud of insects under a single streetlight beside the river. His car was parked in the dark behind him. The windows were wound down. It was silent and looked to be empty. Later, the car was seen by the same incurious fisherman, abruptly driving off the jetty into thirty feet of water.

his two small boys  
are with him in the car  
he drives off the edge  
*unbelievable*  
*he was a top bloke* said his mates...

*He killed them*  
said his wife *he murdered his sons*  
*when the DVO was ordered he couldn't bear to lose control of them* said the football club dads.

Note: DVO a Domestic Violence Order is made under the Domestic and Family Violence Protection Act

## Bones

in all those cleaned white pure bones  
is there still fox?

bones that wrinkle my nostrils with the smell of cleaning agent  
to make them beautiful  
but not fox

rough and sleek pelt, brush tail to die for  
acrid tang of fox den, damp earth,  
no fox

bone laid out in mandala  
bones abstract my fox  
counterpoint my fox

bones  
but not fox

# Annabel Wilson

---

## Quire\*

### 1. एक (ek)

A lozenge of light creeps across the crack at the base of the window shade.  
Everyone's sleeping – I'm awake. We cross the dateline, going back in time,  
moving forward into the past. Cloudlayer stretches for ages, and we're in stasis

### 2. दो (do)

Departures. It's always the right time for a Bloody Mary. I stir Worcester sauce  
into the sanguine drink. Passengers flit about buying things, buying things,  
biding time between flights. Our lives are a series of greetings and goodbyes.

### 3. तीन (teen)

The train to the city makes whale songs as it rumbles through the  
tunnels. Sydney harbour bridge is a fallen piece of punctuation. Rushing  
through the Biennale, I stop at *Phantom 2011*. The tragedy of a Steiner piano on  
fire drags hot tears unexpectedly down my cheeks. The sonata's chorus repeats:  
*You can't be the one*

### 4. चार (cāra)

Through the plane window: the Australian desert. Billabong splashed like a  
Jackson Pollock.

### 5. पांच (pāmca)

A blue cab noses through Kuta traffic. It's still Saturday. Sweet scent of  
frangipani intermingles with fake Armani, buckets of Bacardi. Welcome to Bali.  
When you're single at a wedding, it's good to have an official role. I crash out at  
the hotel, prepare my poem. *Like stepping off a plane into tropical air*

6. छः (chah)

Serendipity Retreat. Every day a new offering in the doorway: today a banana leaf basket encasing pink flowers, incense, 500 rupiah, a cigarette. The gods are watching.

7. सात (sāta)

They say the Balinese have a smile for every emotion. *Libat, libat saja*, I chant *Just looking*.

8. आठ (āṭha) \

Dreamland. Fishermen cast lines off the rocks. Halfway to the horizon, surfers wait for their next big wave. At Uluwatu I pay the fee, don a purple sari. Brushed by broad leaves, I tread the path to the temple at the edge of the sea-cliff, the end of Bali.

9. नौ (nau)

People either find or lose themselves here. I'll probably have to dance with the groom's drunk uncle. Someone will push the best man into the pool. I will say *I'm happily fancy free*.

10. दस (dasa)

Boys on the beach selling Bintang from chilly bins ask *where is your husband? Where you go next?* Sunset turns everything copper. I buy a towel that says *Toughen Up Princess* and a floaty dress.

11. ग्यारह (gyāraha)

*The centre of everything:* Ubud. Hallucinatory Xanadu. Fluorescent dragonflies swoop on cue. On my balcony, I sip green tea. Marvel at the jungle's luminosity. A gold leaf drifts to the Champuan riverbed below. It's both the scale and the details that get me: the expanse of rainforest, sea of rice paddies, that little lizard scuttling over my foot and up the concrete wall.

12. बारह (bāraha)

Woken by the tick tock beat box of the unseen tokay, I circumnavigate the rice-field to town. Brooms in hand, children arrive to sweep the school clean before lessons begin.



13. तेरह (tēraha)

A Balinese farmer writes on his iPad: *I keep my fields green and my rivers clean... the world is watching*. Women carry rocks on their heads to the new development – another hotel. Roosters wait in woven baskets, ready for the next fight. *Someone asks is there wheat in this? I'm gluten free*. And everyone smiles, smiles

14. चौदह (caudaha)

A teapot and a terracotta cup waits on the doorstep. At Ganesha Bookshop I turn as someone reaches for the same text as me: *The Essential Rumi*.

15. पांद्रह (paṁdraha)

*Kelapa - fruit from the tree of life* the vendor says as she hacks into the coconut with a machete. We sip cool water from the fibrous husk. I email the bride: *is it ok to bring a guest?*

16. सोलह (solaha)

Two cups on the doorstep. A red-beaked plant drapes like a Christmas bauble above us, velvety to touch. We sit here every morning, sip sweet tea. A sooty butterfly swoops over your shoulder

17. सत्रह (satraha)

Black eyeshadow sand smudges to silver. Blue waves roll in. Curious palm trees lean over the ocean, whispering

18. अट्ठारह (aṭṭhāraha)

*Like the gathering together*

19. उन्ननस (unnisa)

*of familiar faces, easy laughter*

20. बीस (bīsa)

*Like diving*

21. इक्कीस (ikkīsa)

*to catch*

22. बाईस (bāīsa)

*falling*

23. तेईस (tēīsa)

*vases*

24. चौबीस (chaubīsa)

He finished Rumi and loaned it to me. He left

little notes in the margins: 'Tat Tvam Asi – *I am you, you are me*'.

**\*Quire: n.** (plural **quires**)

One-twentieth of a ream of paper; a collection of twenty-four sheets of paper of the same size and quality, unfolded or having a single fold.

(*bookbinding*) A set of leaves which are stitched together, originally a set of four pieces of paper (eight leaves, sixteen pages). This is most often a single signature (i.e. group of four), but may be several nested signatures.

A book, poem, or pamphlet.

(*archaic*) A choir. The architectural part of a church in which the choir resides, between the nave and the sanctuary.

**Quire: v.** (third-person singular simple present **quires**, present participle **quiring**, simple past and past participle **quired**)

(*intransitive*) To sing in concert.

# Elizabeth Smither

---

## 8 little poems about Canberra

*for Jen Webb*

### from Mount Ainslie

A bowl so delicately washed in ridge and mountain colours  
it's hardly there and would revert  
(capitals are often tentative at first)  
and then a second thought: a lake  
like an Elizabethan slashed sleeve  
lying at the valley's feet.

### Ornamental flowering cherries

Little pink flowering cherries  
of uniform height like Swan Lake's cygnets  
marshalled by taller trees in case  
they disappear somewhere backstage.  
Someone thought ahead of fruit and nuts  
windfalls from trees the size of children  
growing together, gathering walnuts, plums  
gleaming lemons in the twilight.

### Belconnen market

The market's closed. Two women  
are looking for a cooking school.  
Any moment now a posse will appear  
riding on black horses, behind the ironbark trees.  
It's so like being in a Western.  
Soon there'll be a shootout down the empty street  
and not a stall to hide behind: no pyramids  
of aubergines or peppers to mop the blood.  
Two people walking outside the hotel yawn  
and don't close their mouths: there's so much air around.

### At the Hotel Canberra

Not in the dark swirled carpet with medallions  
or on the grand staircase down which Edith\* flew  
as if she owned it: all the poses of the Hotel Canberra

but in this enclosed private garden behind hedges  
where a deckchair might be pulled out  
and a cigarette holder tipped to receive its flame

where conversation puzzled over subjects different from ours:  
power and the need of order, then its abandonment  
in unselfconscious, though not unsophisticated, style

not on the lowest stair, though her descent has caught  
every eye like a wind vane but as she glides  
towards the barman and her drink is already on its way.

\*Edith Campbell Berry, heroine of Frank Moorhouse's trilogy, is a vivid presence in Canberra.

### In Old Parliament House, secretarial wing

More marvellous than the words  
one ex-PM speaks of another  
words so honed they feel like coins  
whose value is the smallest change

are the golf ball typewriters on the desks  
the cardigan over the back of a chair  
even the peace lily in a vase  
nothing too extravagant or wild.

There's a drawer with fresh cartridges  
and the ping of the end of line bell  
all those pounding fingers and the lift-off eraser  
which twirled inside its shell.

Would Edith have snaffled one of these?

### Scrivener dam

The lake was empty. Children rode  
horses along the verges to school.  
An arboretum was planted. Everything  
seemed long distance like the city view.

Medallions on the carpet led to an avenue  
a war memorial, a High Court, National Gallery  
the traffic grew as slowly as the nut trees  
Menzies stopped a ball when Chifley died

but here, in the drifting rain, one sluice  
is open and flourishing. A giant feather plume  
showing everything can be had if you just  
have the word on your Selectric golf ball.

### The conference about poetry

We're told it's wild and ungovernable yet  
we discover in panels like diplomats  
no one goes over time, each courteously reads two poems

with an explanation perfectly balanced. We know  
there is an art of not disturbing the poem. Offer  
too much explanation and it will break down

like Edith commandeering an office and furniture.  
'Can I borrow your umbrella?' one clerk might ask  
another. 'Since you've got your long cardigan.'

## The kangaroo

On the final day of the conference  
a kangaroo quietly appears and stands

in a grove of trees, looking towards  
the lighted windows where we're having cocktails.

Several poets look back and one mentions  
the Devil's advocate at the Universidad de Alcalá  
who stands in an alcove during the viva voce  
staring severely at the candidate.

Dusty creature with a dusty answer  
except none is forthcoming except  
this look of deep retiring modesty  
one in authority with the landscape.

# Ivy Alvarez

---

## Three poems

### Watching Thérèse

uneasily rigid            the brace of your spine            bone chips  
flaking incrementally            hard feathers  
this mattress has an awkward embrace  
your face    turned away in discomfort  
the blues and reds            the yellow  
sheets pool around your body  
smoothing out the scars  
where a doctor tried to put you together  
a patch of light touches your brow  
you must try to stay in this position all night  
one breath on top of another

### Watching Patricia

silk waterfall of feathers under the cover  
your body shifts in its nest of sleep  
a twig vortex  
the blue egg pillow  
your white hair a cloud  
knowledge descending  
as if to land  
hands hooked on the edge  
mouth open    disbelieving    of flight

## Watching Frances

even in sleep you are full of complaint  
face                      down  
                                ash-grey curl  
by the wrinkles of your left eye  
                                you murmur something  
                                *and I don't believe you*

the bed with its own topography  
                                hard to navigate  
but tomorrow everything  
                                is smooth again  
tonight it's sepia roses  
a tilted head    a quizzical look  
                                quiet chirping of the dawn



# Eugen Bacon

---

## Swimming with Daddy

I GET IT RIGHT in the second tumble-turn. I approach the wall with speed, push my nose to my knees, heels to my hips, big kick off the wall.

I have been practising the dolphin kick.

You take in the perfection of my glide. There's warm pride in your eyes, soft eyes that look at someone in a personal way. You don't wear glasses with big metal rims these days. Eyes couldn't see better, you say when I ask.

Little flutter kicks lead to the hand stroke and away, away, I go. I like it when the weather is good like today, when sundown rays through the natural light ceiling put golden shimmers in the pale blue chlorinated water. The floor is tiled, tiny insets the size and shape of sticky notes. I imagine each tile has a message I listen for when you are silent. I track ebony lines at the bottom to keep my swim straight.

'Learn the feel of water,' you say.

You never swam a day in your life, yet you have wisdom to know. You speak clearly, concisely, with ease—easy words, easy eyes of a friend. Your voice is different than before, perhaps then it was alive. Not that now it's dead, just calming. You calm me.

I smile.

You're my daddy tortoise, my Moses, my Mandela—his spirit lives, my Brer Terrapin like in Uncle Remus' stories.

'Remember how Terrapin deceived Brer Buzzard?' I say.

'I told you that story.'

'Same way you told me those why and how stories. Why the crocodile lives in the water. How the zebra got his stripes. When the hyena found his laugh.'

You weave your hands together. Big hands. Strong handshake. Best way to know a person's self is by how they shake your hands, you like to say.

You are well travelled. It is no wonder you have come to visit. Melbourne.

I bought DVDs of music you adore: the soulful sound of 'Mama Africa'. I used to call you the black Irishman, perhaps for your love of the Irish: their humour, their coffee—stirred and topped with cream. The whiff of whiskey on your breath after breakfast was never disagreeable for me growing up. It was for me simply a daddy smell, a happy daddy smell.

One couldn't tell how well travelled you were, how well educated, when you visited grandma in the village. You wore tyre soles and a sheet around your waist. Handwoven batik in colours of the rainbow. You didn't like a shirt or trousers in tropical heat that dizzied mosquitos. You drank toggo, pure banana brew cool from a calabash, washed it down with the soup of goat entrails slowly simmered over a three hearth-stone fire.

I liked how you did the voices, tawkin Suthern like when you did Uncle Remus. You first told his stories straight after your conference in Georgia USA—your work paid for it. I sat on your lap, rested my head on your solid chest and you told me the Terrapin story.

You said: 'Dey social, shake hands, ax each udder what happen ovah in de fambily. Den Brer Terrapin he say to Brer Buzzard dat he tired o' eating grits, and dats a fact. Dat he want to go into biddiness wid 'im, gitting honey from de good ol' bumbly-bee...'

But Brer Terrapin crept alone into de hole, gobbled de last o' bumbly-bee honey, licked it off his 'footses', so ol' Brer Buzzard couldn't tell what he'd done.

You laughed telling that story, told me the moral was not about stealing or deception, like what Terrapin did, but about stupidity. You told me not to be stupid like Brer Buzzard else 'de bumbly-bees gone come a-stinging you'.

'Remember the story of the monkey's heart?' I say.

'You always loved water stories.'

'Tell me the story.'

'You're too old for it now.'

'Tell me.'

'What do you want to hear? How the little monkey who lived with his clan on the bank of the lake fell from the overhung branch of a Baobab tree and the big croc lunged from the murky depths of the water and snatched him in his jaws? How the monkey didn't plead or cry, simply said he didn't have his heart, and the heart was the best part of a monkey for a croc to eat? How Croc believed the little monkey had left his heart on the topmost branch that fanned out leaves to the stars, so gods of land and water could spice it? How Croc opened his jaws and let Little Monkey leap across his back and tail, scramble to his tree to fetch the heart? And Little Monkey bellowed from the top for Croc to open wide for the god-loved heart, and instead hurled a big mango that cracked Croc's tooth?'

'How hard is your heart, Little Monkey, roared Croc,' I say.

'Stupid does that to you.'

You don't tolerate fools. Too much yam in the head, you call it. Sometimes you say too much onion, or cassava.

'You didn't tawk Suthern telling the monkey story,' I say.

'It wasn't from the South.'

'It wouldn't have made me forget our roots, the tongue of our forefathers, like how we prayed.'

*Injina lya tata* / In the name of the father

*No lya mwana* / And of the son

*No lya roho mtakatifu* / And of the holy spirit

*Amina* / Amen

Silent, you watch my backstroke. 'It isn't efficient,' I say. 'Feels like I'm moving blind. No eyes on the crown to see where I'm going.'

'Follow the ceiling.'

'It has no lines.'

'Picture them.'

'How?'

'A challenge then?'

You knew about raising the optimistic child without reading those books proliferating in parenting sections in bookstores. Labels on the shelves of the one around the corner on Flint Street near Twenty Four Seven Pharmacy tell you where to go so you can grow a resilient child, one who is active and success prone. You taught me to stay hungry, to go the step when I was training for sprint team. You shook your head when my lips puckered because I'd lost a race. It's not about winning, you said.

Now you watch my swim, right there by the edge like a coach, even though I am the one who tells you about stroke technique, about how I haven't refined mine because I taught myself.

'The stroke length isn't right, I don't get enough distance out of the stroke,' I say.

'Lower your head.' You surprise me with this observation. 'Level your bottom with your back and head near the surface. Now increase your foot tempo.'

Eddies of water cling to my skin.

I tell you I read about movement coming from hips down, body tipping on seesaw for streamline, cheeks resting on water so I breathe cleanly every fourth stroke.

‘Black folk’s bottom is not made for streamline,’ you laugh. ‘But you’re doing just fine.’

I practise off the wall torpedos.

‘Head down,’ you say. You press my arms against the back of my ears. I dive, eyes downwards. Kick, kick, kick. I finish with a breaststroke, head tucked between outstretched hands, back and head aligned. I pitch and pull my body forward in the water.

You sit on the wooden bench along the wall as I rub down with a large beach towel.

‘Too much cloth,’ you say. ‘Why not robe it?’

You like efficiency, neatness. You smacked me once with a stick was when I let my nails grow. Long time, I was a child ... I cried, not for pain. You weren’t much for discipline. Mum was the flash temper. She gave it to you anywhere—church, school, playground—if you deserved it. Like when I ate fish head first—slap! ‘You eat tail up!’ Like when I spoke with mouthful—slap! ‘Nothing wise comes from clog!’

My Melbourne apartment is not flash; it’s not in Beach Boulevard. But it wears well a careless order: stacked paper neat on the table, arranged clothes on the four-poster bed rail, pressed sheets inside a blue doona ...

I soak, listen to the soft sizzle of mango and coconut body wash foam.

I remember how you took interest in the mouthwash when first you saw it. ‘Need all 945 ml of whitening? Can’t chew sugar cane?’

‘From where?’

We laughed.

You fingered my pore wash (200ml), the soap free antibacterial hand wash (600ml), the body scrub flannel shaped like a mitten, the black stone for my heels—you said it looked like the one your grandmother pressed on skin to take away poison from a snake bite. You liked the snow white porcelain bowl for the toilet brush, its tiny blue flowers around the words ‘Eau de Cologne’; the spin toothbrush with its soft bristles; the squeegee window cleaning stick with its rubber lip to remove scum off the glass ...

The house is under my rule, but subconsciously I follow yours—the order, the cleanliness.

I ponder this in my immersion, knees up in the water.

Something in the air today, it’s like someone has opened the cap off a bottle of nice booze ... I feel heady. You’re in the living room.

You used to massage my shoulders, best big hands ever. Far gone are those days, not since I peaked, arrived at an age when a father gets cautious with his woman-child. The tub is wide as a coffin, more height from the bathroom’s high ceiling, else I’d suffocate. I remember panic when I first learnt to swim, face down in the water, it felt like a shroud over my head.

Clothed, I open the fridge, consider egg pasta veal tortellini.

You peer across my shoulder. There’s something magnetic about you now, your physicality. You’re a head and a half taller than me. Robust—not stocky, big bones. Look good in those wide shoulders.

What new thing have I brought from the supermarket off Queen Market?

I move aside so your eyes, those personal eyes that look at a soul, can take in the sparkling ice tea—four mini cans 250ml each, the dairy-free yoghurt—deliciously creamy, the tub says (1ltr), the horse radish cream (190g), the savoury smoked tomato jam—made in Australia (300ml), the apple cider vinegar in a bottle shaped like the neck of a giraffe (300ml) ...

‘All this. How much?’

I estimate.

How so with ease we fall into our conversations!

‘Don’t throw your name,’ you say.

‘What d’you mean?’

‘The west is infectious.’

‘How?’

‘Just saying. There’s protein in rain termites, in green locusts ... free and organic.’

‘Snatched from the air.’

You prop yourself on the kitchen counter as I fill a saucepan with water to boil the tortellini. You smile at the splash of water into metal. You love sounds, like the distant clap of thunder when it rains, a symbol of transformation you say. After dinner you listen with a cocked head to the sound of the dishwasher on a cycle, swirr, swirr, swirr, then it gurgles.

Gurgle. Gurgle. Like how you did when you were sick.

Bitter, bitter cold in my marrow now. I remember Mother’s ash-streaked face. She sat on red-brown earth surrounded by mourners. She looked ancient. Her going wasn’t long after.

I cry sometimes, a little each year. Tendrils of grief, they bud and burrow.

‘People die to continue the cycle of living,’ you say.

‘No they don’t.’

‘You’re stronger than you think.’

‘I’m not. I keep myself busy. Haven’t had time to scratch my bum since you ... you—’

‘I’m here now.’

‘Yes.’

‘Stop existing. *Live.*’

‘Does grief take a holiday?’

‘Your grief is the swim on it kind. It heals with water. Your animal spirit is the river shark. You have soul memory. In your swim you roam free.’

‘Will you? Swim with me?’

‘Tomorrow I will,’ you say.

# Jessica Clements

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## The Vila

Early in the evenings, as my hair is being brushed, my grandmother tells me the story of the fairies that live behind the mountains and venture down to the lake at night.

‘That is why you must never go down to the lake by yourself,’ she tells me, ‘the *Vila*, they always know.’

As she speaks I feel her breath brushing at the fine hairs on the back of my neck like a dusty wind. I know this story, like the others, is meant to warn me about something much less complicated than she believes I can ever understand, but it is hard to pay attention when it is barely even shadowy outside. The only mountains I can see belong to the soft green peaks of the hills just visible beyond the back of the field. The only lake is the dribbling creek along the side.

When my grandmother has finished her story, she pulls herself off the side of the white bed that is mine and kisses the last spot of the hair she just brushed as if to seal in the shine.

‘Now it is time for goodnight, *mila*,’ she says, moaning a little as she gets up and stretches herself upright. She turns back to look at me once more and flicks off the switch, leaving the door open a crack so light from the hallway shines in to my room so bright and yellow it doesn’t really seem like night has fallen.

I try to sleep but it is too quiet. I remind myself that in a few days I will be home again in my own bed, and the only fairy stories I will hear will be the ones my sister tells me, which are nothing like my grandmother’s.

I wake before it is properly light and I slip out my window, running barefoot along the grass down to the creek. Outside everything is misty and grey like a time when anything could exist.

The water in the creek is low and slips pass the rocks in a smooth stream. I step down into the shallowest part. I’m careful to choose the dry, flat rocks to cross the narrow length of stream the way my sister taught me, testing them for balance before I give them my weight. I imagine her in front of me now and follow like a shadow down the slippery path to where the bank gets high and the trees form a wall, standing like guards at the entrance of another world. This time, I tell myself, I will make it pass the trees and enter the place the Vila live. This time I will not be scared.

I hear my sister edging me on, whispering in my ear the way she does at night. The real Vila, she tells me, are not like the innocent fairies my grandmother makes them out to be, but the trapped souls of girls who are neither dead nor alive but lurking somewhere between. They wander around the creek at night looking for answers, waiting for someone to come and take with them so they won’t feel so alone in their watery grave. At first they seem so nice, so beautiful that you can’t help but follow. But it is a trick, she tells me, smiling. Nothing here is what it seems.

I have only moments to make it before morning arrives and I walk forward, feeling myself get closer than I ever have before. But soon I feel the warmth of the morning sun creeping up behind me. I hear my grandmother in the distance, calling out my name, and I know I have failed again. I clamber up the bank and back to the house, dragging my muddy feet through the window and back between the ivory sheets before I am found out.

In the mornings there are clothes to wash, animals to feed, and things to bake. My grandmother teaches me to make yeast bread with an old recipe I am to memorise and know by heart before

the next visit. She reads aloud from the cookbook she has in her head as she goes along, talking in pounds and ounces and other things I can't imagine the size or shape of.

'Two and a half ounces of butter, *mila*.'

I offer up a whole stick, dropping it onto her old white scales with a clang.

She shakes her head and sighs, taking it off and cutting of a neat square. I sprinkle in the sugar, pouring in the white crystals slowly and letting them fall like snow. When we are finished putting everything in, we gather it into a ball and kneed it on the floury bench.

'Next time we will make scones,' my grandmother says, cleaning flour from her hands with her apron.

'And apple pie?' I ask.

'Even that.'

I ask if I can call my sister and tell her about the pie, but my grandmother smiles and shakes her head. 'She's resting,' she says. 'You have to be patient. Like the bread.'

She smiles and covers the fleshy ball of dough with a tea towel and puts it on the windowsill. I think of my sister lying alone in that colourless room and wonder if I pushed her out into the sun whether she too would rise.

When the bread is ready we take it out from the oven, and cut it while it is still warm, watching hard pats of butter disappear into the surface in a bright yellow stain.

'You know what would be lovely with zis bread?' my grandmother asks between bites. 'Eggs. Fresh from the chook. Don't you think?' She gives me a wink.

I slap my hand to my mouth, drop my bread onto the plate and run outside to the coop. When we are here, it's my sister's job to feed the dog and the chickens, and it is mine to collect the eggs.

I lift up the little roof on the side where the eggs are waiting on pillows of straw. Today there are six, all freckled and brown.

I just finish gathering them up in the hem of my t-shirt when the phone rings inside. I can see my grandmother from the kitchen window with the handset against her ear. She is shaking her head, her free hand pressed to a wrinkled cheek.

She spots me looking from the window and her eyes lock on mine. Before she even thinks to call my name I take off down the grass towards the creek, dropping the eggs onto the ground as I go. They crack at my feet like small, broken suns.

I step into the water and walk the length of the creek along the rocky path, down where the trees stand tall and waiting and their branches reach across the water like arms, reaching; the place the Vila live. I will make it this time, I think. I will not be scared. But when I look up the trees have turned bare and weak under the daylight sun. They almost look as if they are just trees, almost like there is nothing really behind them at all.



# Harriet Cunningham

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## First death

Chris wasn't my first love. Hell, he wasn't even my first Chris. It was the first Saturday of the last week of the music festival at Dartington. I was on my way to do some violin practice with Tracy when he and I bumped into each other in the corridor outside the student common room. Chris was the son of a family friend, but I hadn't seen him for a year. We had things in common to catch up on. I told Tracy I'd see her at dinner.

An hour later she walked past us in the opposite direction. 'You still here?'

The conversation had a way to go. We hadn't realised how much we had to talk about. Parents. Siblings. Mutual friends. Study. Books. Music. Art. Life. The ideas were bouncing around between us like the ball-bearing in an arcade machine. Ping. Ping. Ping. Kerchung, kerchung, ping. It seemed like a good idea to retire to the bar.

That chance meeting turned out to be the start of a most excellent holiday romance. Just a low-key thing, mind. Meeting up after concerts, sneaking off after rehearsals to sit together in the gardens, catching each other's eye across the courtyard and grinning over our little secret. Standing very close to each other, not quite touching. Listening to Beethoven. But then the holiday ended and we went back to real life.

'I'll call you when I get back from Ireland.' A soft ending. No promises.

'Great.' Relaxed. Non-committal. Ce sera, sera.

The night I got back there was a movie Chris wanted to see on at the South Bank. It was a mild end-of-summer night. A walk along the Thames, a bit of art – 'kulcha' we called it, self-consciously – and maybe something else, maybe not.

The something else question still hung in the air when we arrived back at his place later that night. The phone was ringing as he put the key in the door. The trill didn't faze him. 'Answerphone'll get it.'

Sure enough, as the latch tumbled and we stepped into the hall we heard the machine pick up, the loud mechanical clunk of a cassette recorder starting up, and then the voice of the caller, speaking over the message.

'Chris? Are you there? It's Dad. If you're there, pick up.' A ragged breath then, 'We have very bad news.'

Chris's father sounded terrible. Urgent but drained of all recognisable emotion. Something was very, very wrong. Chris reached the phone in a couple of steps but the call had already hung up, and the answerphone was performing its routine of clicks and stops to preserve the ghostly voice in the machine. Chris picked up the handset, dialled, waited, got through. He had his back to me and I couldn't hear the details, but his entire body seemed to slump as he put down the phone and turned to face me. I looked up at him, awkward with concern.

'It's Jenny. She's dead.' 'Wha..? How?' 'She was murdered.'

Murder. It's not a word you use in every day life, especially not in relation to your eldest sister. I knew Jenny well. We'd worked together at the festival. She was an owlish young woman with heavy eyebrows and daggy clothes, but when she talked of things she was passionate about a quiet charisma lit up her blue-stockinged soul. She'd told me about a trip she was planning only a few weeks ago, a walking tour of Bavaria, the King Ludwig way, and completely captured my imagination with tales of fabulous castles and dark forests. She was there now. But dead.

Chris slid down the wall, ending up on the floor in a defeated little crouch. There were no tears, yet, just a terrible, paralysing air of unreality. My instinct was to touch him, to reach out

and hold him, not as a lover but as just another mortal, powerless but there. And yet I could see the clenched jaw, the hands, uncurling and curling into fists, like a baby involuntarily trying out his new skills. Chris's silence and stillness was nothing to do with peace, and everything to do with pent-up emotion. If I touched him, he might explode.

We ended up in bed, because it was night, but neither of us slept. 'I can't stop thinking how scared she must have been,' he kept saying. 'I just see her, I imagine the knife. The blood. It's unbearable.'

I prattled on, trying to fill the thinking spaces, like a sort of aural valium. 'Thank you,' he said at one point. 'Keep talking. I'm scared of silence.' You fall in love, but you don't fall in death. You slip, or slide or, in the case of Jenny, you're pushed, violently. Nevertheless, like love, the experience of death – someone else's, obviously – acts like an accelerant on intimacy, ripping away your emotional carapace, leaving you naked and vulnerable. That, at least, was how it was for me.

Jenny wasn't the first person I knew who had died. My cousin Matthew had been killed in a motorbike accident two years earlier. I remember my father telling me the news, and adding that I needn't feel self-conscious about crying, or not crying. I was. I did. My tears, however, were just a vague acknowledgement of the abstract brokenness of the world. A child's tears because there was no swimming on Tuesday, not real sadness.

I felt Jenny's death much more keenly, not least because, from that dreadful night on, Chris would not let me out of his sight. He was now the oldest child, the only son, who needed to be strong for his mother, his father and his younger sister. He had to put his anxiety and grief to one side so as to play his role in the sorry administration of a death, and the ensuing public mourning. As his de facto partner, I got to carry the bags. I wasn't expected to share the contents. Just keep an eye on them until he had time to deal with them.

We did everything together. We went to visit his younger sister in the mental institution where she was having treatment for a psychotic episode. We called in on his father to make sure he was eating properly. We helped his mother with the invitation list and catering for the wake. When it was time for me to go back to university he came to the train station, put me on board, and watched as the train eased its way out of Kings Cross, bound for Scotland. I felt like a traitor, and a fugitive.

I gave Chris back his baggage a few months later. There was never going to be a good time, but I was foundering under the burden. He had visited a couple of times, making the long trek from London to Edinburgh, staying with me in my narrow single bed in the flat over the chipshop in St Stephen's Street. I was glad to see him arrive, but more glad to see him go, and eventually I told him not to come back. He was bitter but brave, and I loved him for it. Loved him, but was not in love with him, for our relationship was built first on friendship, then on summer loving, then, suddenly, cataclysmically, on the intimacy of grief.

When I returned to the music festival the following year I didn't get in touch with Chris. I knew there was the chance he would be there, but I didn't hesitate. Dartington was his place, and it was my place. It had only been our place for a matter of days, one summer, a year ago. Nevertheless, the Dartington I found that year felt harsh and dry. The vaseline-edged lens, the rose-tinted glasses weren't operating that year. England was in the grip of a severe drought, and even the South West, normally lush at this time year, was parched. The grass in the courtyard was crispy and yellow. The path across the field to Aller Park was hard and dusty. There were signs up in the halls of residence saying, 'Save water! Bath with a friend!' The heat was oppressive. Even the cows looked exhausted.

I was working in the office that year. It was good to keep busy. I had, I thought, got over my personal grief for Jenny, and as for my failed relationship with Chris, the cuts and scrapes of young love were healing nicely.



It was a chance paragraph in a newspaper that made me realise how fragile the recovery process is. 'Two drowned in dinghy accident' went the headline. Two students from Edinburgh University, rowing back to their boat after a night in the pub, capsized and drowned only metres from the jetty, but before help could get to them. I read the names in disbelief. James Burton. Stewart McBride. James Burton... Wasn't that the guy in my Literary Theory course, who always made obnoxious remarks? And McBride – I recognised the name, vaguely, as a friend of a friend of a friend.

They found me huddled in a corner, sobbing uncontrollably, over the death of two people I barely knew. Tears on a trigger switch.

'Bound to happen,' said the office manager, 'what with...' She raised her eyebrows. 'Y'know. Jenny.' They mopped me up and set me back on my feet.

Then it happened again, that night, at the concert. I'd been looking forward to hearing Ravel's String Quartet. It is always a treat: the first movement has the charm of a bedtime story, spiked with weird whole tone scales to send delicious shivers through your bones, and the second movement has that funky two-against-three groove.

The great hall was packed. Every seat in the central block was full, and people were squeezed up, enforced cosiness, on the side benches. The small casement windows were all opened as wide as possible, but the air within and without was heavy, glutinous. There was no movement, but for occasional fidgets – unsticking bare legs from a seat, noses wrinkling at a passing whiff of sweat. It was suffocating.

Ravel helped. The liquid sound of violins intertwined with cello irrigated the mind, and a whisper of tremolo hinted at cool breezes. I could almost feel the tickle of wind on the back of my neck, making the hairs stand up. Hold on. They were standing up. Was it real?

My attention snapped back to the stage as the four performers launched into the fourth movement. *Vif et agile* it's marked, lively and agile, but the start is way more than that: it's positively brutal. All that French elegance and beauty channelled into a raw scream of, I don't know, anger? Blind, irrational rage? As the quartet landed on those grotesque dischords I felt the windows rattle, the sound waves making the sluggish air ripple. And then, from outside, I heard the skies answer back. A low rumble at first, then a staggering, shattering crack of forked lightning reaching out to the dessicated earth. A storm. The storm. The much anticipated front, coming from across the North Atlantic to dump water onto the parched South West. As the quartet grew more frenzied, crescendoing towards the final bars, their efforts to be heard were challenged by a new noise. First, a faint percussive tap, swelling to an insistent machine-like clatter, then the individual patters merging into a great roar. The rain had arrived, and the audience rose to their feet to applaud it, answering the grey hubbub outside with their manual cacophony.

Exhausted, sweaty, but buoyed up by the applause, the quartet stood. The audience bayed their approval. And in my seat, wedged between two pairs of warm thighs, alone amongst the foule, I sat silently, tears running down my cheeks. Jenny. Chris. Matthew. James and – what was his name again? – Stewart. Love. Death. I didn't know what I was feeling. I just knew that with this storm and this music, this moment in time, I was experiencing a still point. I tasted the salty tears running over my lips and began to breathe again.

# Margarita Korenblum

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## Hypobaropathy

The mountain winds are calling through your hair,  
I will not wake to anyone but you.  
I feel as though I looked, and it was there.

My ribcage wants more pressure in the air;  
The balance and the breath are all askew.  
The mountain winds are calling through your hair.

I tried to list the reasons I should care  
But nothing listable came into view.  
It won't reduce – I looked and it was there.

I, following, was blinking in the glare:  
I missed when it crept in. I'm listening to  
The mountain winds all tangled through your hair.

All instincts shy away from letting me declare  
In any form but dizziness-blurred clues:  
I'm telling you I looked and it was there.

I'm leaving you this message, if I dare,  
Beneath the snow to find as though it grew.  
The mountain winds are calling through your hair.  
Forgive me love – I looked, and it was there.

# Allan Lake

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## Concrete Images of Sicily

A bit of cement and loads of sand  
plus rivers of sweat = a house, villa,  
apartment block, another storey.  
Most get finished eventually  
but not before the elements collude to under-  
mine. sea salt wind sun  
Nature supplies raw material  
then comes the spiteful tempesta.

Reinforceconcretewithrebar but  
still small cracks let in rain and just  
enough collapses to expose your  
determination for the flawed thing it is.  
Objective forever;  
a decade or two achieved.

Not like early churches of stone,  
marble temples of pagan Greeks  
who came, shared their DNA,  
built what even outlasted their gods  
and retreated homeward to wallow  
in debt or wealth and history.

Tourists come to see what used to be,  
the empty, ancient mountain villages.  
In August they lie on the beach,  
get the tan that tells their friends  
they holidayed somewhere,  
rented spare rooms made of concrete.  
There's money in beds and bad  
breakfasts, euros for christenings  
at least till the tourists get bored  
because interiors start to look  
more IKEA than Mediterranean.

A funeral procession stops traffic,  
momentarily. Some body is being  
driven at great expense to that hill  
above town where the concrete coffin,  
made locally, will slide into a concrete  
hole in a hive of holiness. Concrete city  
of the dead, who require fresh flowers  
and perhaps a small electric light  
so those left can display their devotion.

Deaths, births, weddings, baptisms –  
the cement that binds individual grains.  
Mount Etna, just down the road,  
spews its lava which becomes sand  
and concrete curbing, gate posts, statues  
of Padre Pio, Jesus' Mum or a beatific  
lamb before the slaughter. The pagans,  
Jews and Moslems left other things behind,  
some that survived the elements, Roman  
Catholicism, the developers' bulldozers.

Concrete new marries the old so there's  
reluctance to sell what's beyond repair.  
The great-grandparents' dead eyes stare  
from those plastic-framed photos  
at the end of their coffins and family  
in America or Australia may throw  
a few dollars to insure nothing  
is forfeit because property is holy.  
The Chinese may now make and sell  
almost everything, but those tomatoes  
from the garden plot behind the stone  
and concrete ruin taste so much  
better than shiny ones from the supermarcato.

# Su-Yee Lin

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## Garden Party

I snake into the party and feathers fly, their women rustling like tulle,

like dry leaves against grass. This skin of mine is enough to shake a deer or a wolf. Settle down, settle down, my chickadees, my sparrows, my vultures and starlings. Instead of bellowing wind, the hiss hiss of still air and the absence of crickets. They are in the rafters now, these birds, these women, and they will not look down. They close their eyes; I open mine. They fall asleep and their pretty feet drop them

slowly

down.

# Mark Mahemoff

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## Night Safe Area

A train has just pulled out.  
Rain is dripping from awnings.

There's a man with tattooed calves –  
green tracings not filled in –

and a woman with scar slashed cheeks  
explaining timetables  
to the nervous person next to her.

It's me and other misfits,  
old, young and wrecked,  
huddled under shelter,  
waiting to be moved.

# Kristine Ong Muslim

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## The Waiting Room

Do you simply ignore the noisy creaking of your aging body? Or do you talk incessantly about the pageantry of your youth while silently enduring the chronic shortness of breath, the painful weakening of joints, the uncontrollable emptying of the bladder? How your skin barely yields when gouged open by claws. When you hobble inside your bathroom in the middle of the night, do you always feel as if the universe were receding—receding in a four-dimensional swagger that carves tunnels, tunnels that siphon back everything you cannot carry—and you are stuck in a plane, a plane that takes you for granted, that draws attention away from whatever drives a body to stay alive even when it is slowly being drained of its balance?

## Minotaur

Prowler in your own Labyrinth  
now rendered obsolete by aerial surveys  
and three-dimensional interactive maps.  
In this zoo, the view to your woodland  
exists only in your mind. In this zoo,  
what you know and what you choose to know

may or may not lead to survival.  
So you press the red button that drives  
your handlers' pilot lights just to see  
how their eyes burn aflame with glee,  
the joy of little men who believe  
that they are fully in control.

Remember the trodden, twisted shape  
of your once-verdant fields  
at the wake of marauders,  
your bestiary wailing in the barn,  
your fallow land of scarecrows teeming  
with crows, with your darling psychopomps.

# Jane Palmer

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## Two Stories from Aceh

### *At Simpang Lima*

*Simpang Lima* is the largest traffic intersection in Aceh. It is a flattened dome of grass and flowers, at its centre a tall white monument dedicated to a bank. Five streets stretch outward, grey ribbons between towering bill-boards. Spindly trees droop in the dusty air. *Labi-labis*, large black ovens on wheels, sit in crooked rows along the edges of the streets, waiting for passengers to climb onto their narrow benches and make the driver's return trip worthwhile. Cars and motorbikes stop and start in five directions.

This afternoon at *Simpang Lima*, there are people arriving by foot, dressed up as trees or waving cardboard chainsaws. On a narrow grassy island which splits one of the rivers of traffic, I am standing with a dozen others. Each of us clutches a few tiny nursery trees wrapped in black plastic. We wear hand-painted signs which say 'Earth Day', and '*Hentikan Pemanasan Global*' – stop global warming.

A young man, my companion for the afternoon, comes up to me and wordlessly takes one of my trees. He steps down onto the street to knock on the window of a car stopped at the traffic lights. The driver stares, then winds down the window. He makes a brief comment and takes the tree. The young man returns to me, with a double thumbs-up and a brilliant smile. I hand him the next tree, and watch him step among the stationary cars to face a couple on a motorbike. He holds out the tree, and the woman on the back smiles and grabs it before the lights change and the bike roars off.

Beside me, there are a dozen other pairs, teenager and adult, the older one holding the trees while the younger darts into the traffic. My young companion was hesitant at first, but now I stand back and watch his interactions with the drivers, his pleased smile when he returns empty-handed. He doesn't laugh, because he can neither speak nor hear. Like the other teenagers excited and running about with trees in their hands, he spends his days in one of Aceh's 'special' schools for kids with disabilities. For all of them, today is a rare excursion into the outside world.

The traffic island has become a party, school kids, university students, visitors like me, grinning and high-fiving. Amongst the spindly trees and glaring billboards, above the roaring traffic, we are high and light as air.



## Maghrib

Sunset in Banda Aceh is a quiet time, of closed shop doors, a scattering of pedestrians and motorbikes, and a few cars like ours. Our Acehnese driver takes us to a café on the riverbank, hidden from the road, where those who don't pray are talking and laughing loudly over coffee. The air is scented with the coffee, with the rising river smells and the petrol that vaporises from motorbikes parked beside our table. The last of the sun sparkles on slow river water and glances off the graceful blue and yellow prows of fishing boats. Here we wait until we re-emerge into the evening and into the flow of headlights towards market and shops.

*Maghrib*, the sunset prayer time is over, but its residue is a kind of torpor – weighting the arms of a vendor as he pushes up a shutter, the movements of the stall keepers uncovering again their fruit and furniture. Motorbikes and cars too are slow to gather pace, and the endless sharp tooting of daytime has given way to the quieter, different evening.

*Maghrib* is known as the prayer of red twilight. It starts minutes after the sun sets, and its end is like the end of grief – a bone deep quietude that stills the body and readies it for the peaceful dark.

During decades of conflict across the countryside, this evening time of peace became the time of greatest fear. I still remember the note of regret in the voice of an old Acehnese man:

*Very hard, during the conflict. At the Maghrib prayer nobody showed up in the mosque. During the conflict time, when the afternoon comes, everyone closes the door, we stay at home and pray. Otherwise, they will take us if they come.*

*Sometimes, we will observe the situation; if it's safe then we will go and pray, behind the wall. But after prayer, we have no further chat; everyone just goes back home. If they happened to take us, we might not survive from what they will do.*

'We might not survive from what they will do'... but tonight we are in peace time. In the rare luxury of our car, we move through a twilight that is now blood red and tangerine orange, flaring out behind the black curves of the mosques and scudding over the low flat rooftops of the city.

The driver tunes in to the local radio station. As always there is a piece of music to mark the end of prayer and the return to the everyday world. Tonight's music, our driver tells us, is an Acehnese folk song played by a young local man on acoustic guitar. He reaches across and turns up the sound.

The air shivers to the first notes. It is piercing, melodic, a long drawn out keening. It quickens to a crescendo, slides into a decrescendo, and ends in a last long sigh. As we pick up speed through the darkening streets, the notes are a memory of all the grief in the world, brief moments of joy, and then, on a note breathed outwards, release and emptiness.

# Sarah Penwarden

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## Losing it

Watch the  
leaves  
drop

in circles,  
watch the wind  
take them;

red tree –  
with every rustle of wind  
she loses them

*autumn  
in the north:  
a red maple leaf  
floats down  
stream<sup>1</sup>*

sit for a while,  
watch them  
spin rivers

in the tin sky;  
they shuffle  
through the air,

ponding orange  
under benches  
behind buildings

settling in a  
thick brown carpet  
on which we walk

her name meant  
the sound of wind in  
the trees

*the maple tree is new  
come autumn and its leaves will turn to flame  
what I must do  
is live to see that, that will end the game<sup>2</sup>*

On this airy day, leagues of light  
above my head, the world  
distils to this:

a leave blown up  
into a thin  
sky.

I too  
am turning,  
always becoming  
bronze.

**Pablo Neruda**  
*visits Russell*

The bodily outline of islands,  
all curves and dips and  
mounds of bays,  
then soft  
across the water,  
Waitangi's white cross.

<sup>1</sup> Richard von Sturmer, *Sparrow notebook*

<sup>2</sup> Clive James, *Japanese maple*

# Julia Prendergast

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## Ghost Moth

'Bastards of animals. Nothing redeeming about a fox.' Chris is tugging and groaning, trying to pull the lamb out of the birth canal. He talks easily, as if Rachel had only wandered down from the house. He ignores the missing years—he doesn't mention her unexpected arrival, fanging along the dirt road as if she were herding wayward sheep.

'Shitful creatures,' says Chris. 'Worse than ever this season. Maybe I'm too old for this,' he laughs. He is kneeling, bent over the ewe, talking in a steady voice as Rachel has seen him do so many times before. 'Okay. Okay. Easy girl,' he says. 'Tomorrow this will be a bad dream.'

Rachel stands behind the sheep's back, partially shielded from the bloody mess. She stares across the paddock towards the green gully, the century old eucalypts—tree limbs scattered like bones, tunnels of yellowy light flooding the shadowy woodland.

'Head's been out a long time,' says Chris, moaning, pulling. He talks as if he's briefing the vet. 'Vulva's swollen as hell but no prolapse.' He heaves again, as if he's the one in labour. 'No vomiting... The lamb would have survived. I've pulled other ones, colder and stiffer, roused them. They can survive for hours in that position. But not without a tongue...' He strains and pulls. 'Foxes always take the soft parts—tongues and ears, bottoms.' Chris releases his grip, breathes deeply, resting his buttocks on his heels. 'Feral... Fucking... Foxes...'

Eddie begins to cry. Chris starts at the newborn cry, turning sharply. Rachel walks towards the car, driver's door ajar. Her father follows. He peers at the newborn baby. 'Well I'll be...' he says excitedly, stretching his bloody hands behind him, leaning his head forward for a closer look.

'Is it yours Rach?'

Rachel nods.

'A grandfather ay? A boy?'

Rachel nods again.

'God Rach. Why didn't you tell me?'

Rachel shrugs, fights the crying. 'I'll take him up to the house.'

Chris walks back to the ewe. 'I thought he was a fox for a second. In broad daylight... Sounds just the same,' says Chris. 'I'd forgotten that newborn sound altogether... Can't believe I thought he was a fox. Poor little fella... mistaken for dog scum.'

Chris stands at the kitchen sink, scrubbing his bloody hands as if he's a backyard surgeon, as if he's just lost a patient. 'BASTARDS of animals.'

Rachel had feared questions but interrogation had never been part of her father's game.

Chris uses a soapy nailbrush, attacks his nails. His sleeves are rolled above his elbows. The rolled-up sleeves remind Rachel of the birth. Bloody forearms wrangling forceps. It's lambing season for God's sake. Everything reminds Rachel of the birth.

'Shitful scum of an animal,' Chris continues, standing at the kitchen sink, shaking his head as he scrubs. His straight, greying fringe dances against his forehead like the yellow-grey grass beyond the verandah, sweeping in one direction and then another.

Rachel sits near the front window in her favourite room, breastfeeding Eddie. Beside her is the spinning wheel. It hasn't been used, or even moved, since Rachel's mother left. Rachel's mother is a weaver. Edwina is her name but they don't speak it. The bobbin is half spun. The

wheel is as still as concrete. It marks the mother's leaving solemnly. The wheel is called a maiden; the maiden wheel has hooks on it, sharp as a fox's teeth, sharp as a mother in a half-spun love story. The fleece hangs in time beside the maiden wheel, loose threads of oily wool like an untended cobweb, fibrous, like mother love.

Weavers are thread-tamers. Sharp teeth turn fleece to usable yarn. Rachel wishes her mother had finished the roll, filled the bobbin before leaving—it's too much, spider web threads hanging, fleece dangling like a lamb's ragged flesh. Rachel likes to sit beside the spinning wheel but she can't look at it for more than a moment. She turns instead to the grey moth carcasses, littering the verandah like dirt-flecked yarn. The moths are as big as small birds here in eucalypt country, scattered across the verandah like small brown finches. They fly into the windows at night, moist flesh thwacking against glass like a greedy wet tongue.

The females are larger, seven or eight inches across the wingspan in some cases. They're not pretty like the birds with their speckled downy coats. Up close the moth-markings are huntsman-like. In fact they're harmless. Once airborne their life is short—two or three days at best—they sacrifice their working mouthparts for wings. They can fly but they can't feed and so they are propelled, blind flight towards certain death.

The farmhouse walls are covered with this sort of information, framed images and bibliographic notes—the lifecycle of moths and lambs, various species of eucalypts and birds, printouts and cutouts in dusty frames. The farmhouse is like a shrine, a stone-dwellers museum—Stone-Dwellers—the original name for the people of this country. Rachel looks out towards the rocky outcrop. The blatant rockscape bursts from the hillside like unexpected laughter but there's nothing funny. It's all grey—the rockscape, the downy moths, windblown fleece.

Chris wanders over to the window, reaches down and strokes Edwin's head with his soapy clean hand. 'So many moths,' he says, looking across the verandah. 'Too many for the chooks.' Chris pauses, looks at Rachel a moment, then at his hands, inspecting his fingernails for blood. Although they are clean he returns to the kitchen sink, scrubs them again.

As a young girl, Rachel walked beside Chris, holding the compost bucket dutifully as they meandered around the perimeter of the house, collecting moths for the chickens.

'They must be blind,' says Rachel, giggling.

'Temporarily,' says Chris. 'Blinded by the light. In fact they have two sets of eye chambers, so they're eyesight is better than other insects, but they're drawn to the light, like a moth to flame as the saying goes.' He rubs the stubble of his greying whiskers, bristly and dry like a garden broom against dusty floorboards. 'They fly towards the light automatically. They can't help themselves. And they're fast. That's why some people call them Swift-Moths rather than Ghost-Moths, because of the rapid flight. The term Ghost-Moth is for the males, because they're lighter in colour. They dance across the hedgerow at dusk, skittering over the grass to attract the females.'

Rachel unlatches the gate of the chook enclosure. 'Their bodies are like fat witchetty-grubs,' she says. 'Blind fatty-fat witchetty grubs,' she laughs.

'Of course,' says Chris. 'Because we look like what we are, and witchetty grubs are the larvae, the moth larvae.'

'WHAT?'

'Before they grow wings, in their underground stage.' Chris throws the contents of the compost bucket into the chook pen. The chooks peck at the lively moths as they flutter amongst potato and carrot peels, the startling yellow of zucchini flowers against red-brown earth.

'Oh no. NO,' says Rachel desperately. 'No more ghost moths for the chickens. I won't eat the eggs from ghost moths. Witchetty grubs, like maggots on the lambs after the foxes take

their soft parts. Maggots... like ghosts in our eggs. Why didn't you tell me?' Rachel sobs uncontrollably.

'It's good protein for the chooks Rachel. Stop it please. You're being silly. STOP THAT NOISE.' Rachel runs to the vegetable garden, collecting fresh zucchini flowers like yellow lilies. She walks down the red brick path, slippery with moss, picking flowers from the rosemary bushes, filling her arms with flowers for the wishing gully, trying to forget the maggoty moths—underground ghosts, taking flight, pretending to be beautiful on their twilight stage; hideous moths, dancing the rosemary hedgerow at dusk, trying to get the female moths to come. Rachel is glad the bright lights get them, flame vampires, burrowing, clawing, eating the soft, fleshy roots of the trees like underground foxes.

Chris wanders back to the window, rubbing his forearms with a hand-towel. 'The cowardice—a whole life on the farm—but you don't get used to senseless. Attacking a mother in labour...'

'Hmmm,' says Rachel, thinking that he'd never have used the word mother in the past. He'd have said: 'Animal in labour or birthing sheep.'

'That lamb was stuck like concrete. Fox took its tongue... and ear. Thrill killing scum. I couldn't get the leverage and I couldn't push the head back in the birth canal: infection would have killed her; head had been out too long. I had to decapitate, reach in for the legs. Got it out in the end. The mother may survive. 50-50 I'd say...'

Chris dries his hands carefully, inspecting his knuckles, paying attention to the web of skin between his fingers. 'What's his name?'

'Eddie. Edwin.'

'For Edwina... after her?'

'Well not AFTER her because there's nothing. No before... Only fleece.' Rachel laughs but there's nothing funny and she stops. 'Just to fill the name, make it useful,' she adds. They glance at the spinning wheel as if it were a television, airing an important announcement. They glance away just as quickly. Rachel clears her throat. 'It's the loose threads,' she says. Regrets it. Bursts into tears.

'You remember don't you?' Asks Chris.

'I can't believe I had the power to block that. All those years of forced forgetting.'

Rachel's mother left a few hours after they arrived home from hospital—Rachel was squealing, gurgling blood like a baby lamb. According to Chris, Edwina stuffed her entire wardrobe into a couple of garbage bags and said: 'This mothering thing is not for me. I'm not cut out for it... I'm a weaver.'

Chris touches Eddie's head again, softly, tenderly. 'I'm going back to the paddocks for a while,' he says. 'I want to keep an eye on the ewes. Another couple are close to their time now...'

Chris has lamb blood on his neck. On his skin it looks brown, like old blood. On the lamb's new white neck it was strawberry pink. The blood near Chris' neck has seeped around his collarbone, staining his skin like wet-brown earth on the ghostly moths, dead wings flapping in the wind as if they were still alive.

Rachel straps Edwin to her chest. She walks the farm while he sleeps, swaddled across her torso. In farm time, markers of death scatter the earth, unburied. Rachel is drawn to the jaundiced accordion of the sheep's ribs, to the pebbly white of the sheep's teeth, still firmly embedded in the jaw, clutching the hollow black skull. Rachel touches the brittle rib cage; she touches Edwin's cheeks and lips, soft and fluid as water—they're not so far removed. Edwin squirms sleepily, straddled to Rachel's chest. She places her pinky finger in his mouth, strokes his tongue, crying quietly. He sucks her finger, panting lustfully after the sweet scent of breast milk.

Yesterday, as Rachel packed her belongings and loaded them into the car, she was aware

of how desperately she needed the farm. She packed hurriedly, acutely aware that she needed her father—knowing it boldly, with the same blind certainty that she suddenly understood mis-mothering, because love is death, they are entwined and must be—expectations and desperation scattering the earth like bones, hanging, like untempered fleece, fragile betrayals clawing—clinging. The sheep mis-mothered if they were moved suddenly, if they were frightened into moving unexpectedly—the babes got lost and the mothers couldn't remember which ones belonged to them. In the panic, in the flight, they were blind to their own offspring. They didn't walk away on purpose but in the animal world it still counts as a *mis*—even if the abandonment is unintentional, it still counts. Emotional intent is not the issue.

Perhaps we all fail our children one way or another. Even with the best intentions, perhaps we all mis-mother. In our blinkered-blindness we must forget them in the very moment that we can never see clear of them. From the moment of birth they shade our living, like twilight. Rachel takes a piece of the bony rib, rakes it through the rich granules of earth, pushing firmly and deeply until the brittle rib breaks. She stands, walking steadily towards her father. He is bent over the ewe, same as always.

Chris heaves, pulls. 'He's a big one. Too big for a first-season mother... The head is twisted at an odd angle. She'd have been having a shit of a time anyway.' He gestures to the first-born lamb, the dead twin. Chris pulls, groans, his muscles flexing beneath a fitted cotton t-shirt, shoulders bulging. 'Bottom-torn-out of the first,' he says breathlessly, 'while she laboured with the second.'

Rachel stares at the lamb's hollowed-out bottom, whimpering. She stares long and hard as if she's a suburban visitor, as if she has no idea what a fox will do. She holds her tongue squarely between her teeth, biting down, forcing the remembering.

Rachel catches her father staring, clutching the half-born lamb behind the ears. His hands are lathered in margarine, the best thing for a stuck lamb's head. Rachel doesn't have any words to fill the brokenness and the silence is marked. Rachel and her father, running parallel, like a sheep's ribs.

Growing up, Rachel wanted her father to ask questions, to offer solutions, to guess when things were wrong. She wondered whether that was the domain of mothers rather than fathers because Chris never asked questions. He waited on things, thinking they'd rot into the earth, given time. He concerned himself with things that demanded his attention—sheep caught in fences, a lamb stuck in a mother's pelvis, a fox shredding the underside of a lamb, so that there was nothing to do then but shoot it, if you were there, if you happened upon it before the flies—the maggots.

Chris pulls the lamb free and the mother tends to it. He wipes his hands on an old towel. He stares intently at Rachel but she has no words. She breaks into a sob.

Chris says: 'Some people take our soft parts. We can't understand. We're not supposed to. From each side there's blindness.' Chris stands, holds Rachel tight. She can smell the yellow soap he's used forever, like washing powder. She sinks into his neck, tastes tears and bitter sweat. She can smell wet ewe and birthing blood—it's not metallic, like everyday blood—it's sweeter. Even for animals it's different.

'Moths are attracted to the light but they're blinded by it, remember. Sometimes it's only flight—flame. Sometimes that's all there is... Let me take Eddie.' He says the name cautiously, as if he's speaking a new language, sounding out the word. 'I'll be right here, near the tractor shed. One of the other ewes is swollen like a watermelon and the bag is out. She's agitated and I'm watching her. You'll be able to see me Rach. Go and walk in the gully. Take some time... If Eddie wakes or cries I'll COO-WEE.'

Rachel walks to the wishing gully of her childhood, the beautiful dead gully. She takes



yellow zucchini lilies and rosemary. She knows the witchetty grubs are just under the earth, gnawing at the roots, clawing, feeding on the soft under parts of the trees, like maiden teeth at a soft new tongue. Some of the old trees look strong and vigorous, even with their trunks hollowed and black—and maybe that's it, maybe that's the lure, the fact that they are still standing, in spite of the bone branches scattered around them like discarded limbs, despite moth carcasses and the flutter of dead wings.

Rachel's dreams are right here, swirling like the wind in tree hollows, parading like moonlight moths along the hedgerow. Rachel breaks brittle branches in her dry hands and thinks of margarine—her father's moist hands lathered in margarine, glossy wet. She frets about her father's slippery hands and her breasts gush thin milk. She hears car tyres, crunching gravel, the lawnmower churning of an old Volkswagen engine. She knows the noise in words, word-sounds from her father's memory—a mother skidding out of the driveway, a baby squealing to be near the mother, squealing to be rid of her. The mother plants her foot on the accelerator, tastes infant blood on the back of her teeth. She spits into her hand, wipes the mess on her jeans.

Rachel runs blindly, yelling.

'Don't let her touch him. Don't let her.' Rachel runs hard, screaming. She can only muster the same sentence. 'Dad. Don't let her. DAD! DAD!'

When Rachel reaches the tractor shed, Chris has a gun pointed at Edwina, baby in one hand; gun in the other.

'I'll call the police,' says Edwina. 'You can't point a gun at me,' she adds. Edwina turns to Rachel. 'Hi... *Beautiful*,' she says, taking a few steps toward Rachel, intercepting her pathway to Chris, to Eddie.

'Not another step,' says Chris.

'You can't point guns at people,' says Edwina. 'I'll call the police. They'll come. They'll arrest you.'

Chris laughs. He has a dimple on his left cheek, a long slit. Eddie has it too. Rachel has seen it in his windy baby smile, when he's full and sleepy with breast milk, creamy hind-milk like soft cheese. Rachel makes a dash towards Chris, takes Edwin.

Chris clears his throat and straightens his arm, raises the gun a little higher. 'I'll call Frank,' he says laughing. 'Stone-Dwellers police chief. He's only eight kilometres down the road. That way...' Chris gestures towards the tractor shed with a nod, holding the gun steady. 'He's got a long memory, Frank, and he knows about foxes. Only last week his family milking cow had its teats chewed off. Around here we're very clear about foxes—thrill killing cunts—we take matters into our own hands. Protect our own.'

'Let me see the baby,' says Edwina, face ashen. 'Please...' she adds, softly as a moth's wings.

Chris clicks the gun, ready for fire.

'I'm sorry,' says Edwina, her arm stretched towards Rachel.

'They're just words,' says Chris. 'They mean nothing here.'

Edwina walks to her car. She walks slowly, backwards, eyes on the gun.

'I'M A WEAVER,' she says forcefully, but her words are obliterated—thwacked senseless by the gunshot, splattered, like a thousand ghost moths against thick glass.

Chris shoots the ewe between the eyes, dead centre. Edwin startles at the bang, cries momentarily, and resettles against Rachel's warm breast. Chris takes a pocketknife and slices the ewe deliberately between vulva and anus, pulls the lamb free.





## railing against

[‘language...first brings man about, brings him into existence’ – Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought, 1971]

I’m railing against                   E  
  N  
its tepid rotes                         G  
  L  
& rotted topos                       I  
  S  
its stupid lexis                       H  
  
  p  
  of  
  stokers,  
  stirrers  
  engineers  
  
to derail the caboose  
deep  
    i  
      n  
       t  
       o  
the coulee it created,  
with its *fanfaronade*  
    its contagion  
      its wanton w r e c k a g e  
  of ethnic signals  
  
  &  
the profound  
                  pity  
                   of  
                    this all.

# Andrew Gordon Rogers

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## (Desire) Song

He crowded himself with paperbacks, pushed them  
down and pulled at them like levers, waited for

the movement to move other things and they  
drowned the living room, getting by as the word

‘goodbye’ was getting worse. The drainage ditches below  
sucked for air; the man at the 7-11 across the way was on some

great drug. He moved inward, to the other room; smoke billowed  
from a poisoned bird – the glass one with blue wings – the thing that

eluded him standing high in the corner. The apse of the church –  
where only he who drank the potion saw the potion operate –

was recalled: he watched from the outside. Somewhere, the moving  
ones moved; further still, the ones who were still remained still.

When the car horns bellowed below, he fell into the crowd: fell back and forth.  
The books became great novels – larger than the Rosetta Stone – filled with

the bounty of man, woman, and child: sweet children all across the burning  
street, lights attaching themselves to the slowest movements.

The walls, again, were bookshelves; the bookshelves were skyscrapers;  
the unending intimidation was moving toward all of us

while I watched – steadily peering into the underworld, moving further under –  
and the place I heard about as a child, some sort of heaven, rose

from the carpet to the ceiling. He punched through the paper, took deep  
breaths, managed the song of the meadowlark from his mouth,

round and unending until the moon was behind his head; a marriage of water,  
paper, and sky all congealed into a horse too large to mount.

## (Home) Song

Everyday, at midday, the Ladder-back comes  
to drum on my metal chimney,

to peck for invisible insects, sucking down  
only steam, until the sun beats

the roof no more: the echo of his darting  
crest climbing down into my home,

the thunder of the little sound, monstrous through  
the vent. And he, somehow, reminds me

of my brother – the *one*, we whisper, *at war* –  
and I think of the metal-splitting sounds,

those hard headless growls he must hear,  
against the pound of that woodpecker

on my metal spout; one thousand times  
a minute – think, think, think – hard press of

beak against the chimney, dents of time  
seeping into the already-sunken piece of tin.

# Martin Stannard

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## Three Poems from the Chinese

### Orange

after 感遇#2 by Zhāng Jiǔlíng (678-740)

Here in the sunny South  
I am like the sweetest of oranges among the orange trees

Season to season year after year  
I have my share of disappointment and joy

But even in Winter I find a warmth that sustains me  
Until the arrival of Spring

You may occasionally invite me to enjoy the company of your beautiful friends  
And I don't mind that, but actually I don't really think very much about it at all

We each have our life, our fate and fortune  
The world goes on anyway

And while you play as you please  
Among the peach trees and the plum trees

I'm here in the sunny South  
The best of oranges among the sweet orange trees

### The Sandpiper

after 旅夜書懷 by Dù Fǔ (712-770)

There is the lightest of breezes, and I am adrift  
Under the stars, the river full of the full moon  
But everything has been moving too fast for me

Poetry did not bring fame, but old age is bringing  
A slowing down and over there on the mud  
Is a bird, scavenging for food, trying to stay alive

## Visiting an old friend

after 過故人莊 by Mèng Hàorán (689-740)

At your house we dined on chicken  
With greens from your garden  
Then sat gazing at the green hills  
Beyond the hedgerows, drinking wine

The world of other people was forgotten as we talked  
And shared what has always interested us

Now I sit alone drinking chrysanthemum tea  
Trying to forget and trying to remember

I shall visit you again  
Wait for me

# Patrick West

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## Cicely, Sis

For the third time in as many minutes, Hayden Talon commenced his swaying, graceless approach, like a vessel more water than man—a coffin ship of centuries past. In prospect before him: the ‘French letters’ so-called—‘English overcoats’, frangers. Brazenly, tantalizingly... tauntingly at his fingertips.

Even supermarkets were selling condoms now, and Hayden felt himself deeply under their spell, as if they were watching him no less intently than he was watching them: warily, explaining things slyly to themselves—things alive.

Years had passed since he’d last had to buy such an item. Fleeting, Hayden recalled a younger version of his wife—knew again (for an instant!) all those early, oh so glorious, fumbings in the dark; thought of the magnificence of sex.

Thought of the majesty of times never to be recovered!

To begin with, never again would Hayden’s children lie gigglingly asleep within his supermarket trolley—flaxen hair flaring every which way—while he dashed them down aisles stocked with goods beyond number, beyond all conception, camouflaging their bodies with every necessity and luxury of life. Burying his kids as only a father knows how to; satisfying all atavistic, plundering desires. Hayden’s offspring, each of them, thus becoming a tumulus of products: exultantly motionless, gently entombed. Twins (enwombed chrysalises) only waiting to unfold—re-born—blinking into the light. Urgent for spring-time at the checkout.

None of that anymore.

No more grasping, either, after answers to his children’s unending questions:

‘Dad,’ one or the other would begin.

‘Yes,’ replies Hayden.

‘Why am I me?’

Little of that anymore, little of that madness, that childishness beyond belief. No-one wasn’t growing up. Still here he was—Hayden Talon, at the cosmos’ mercy—like some queer peeping Tom, spying on condoms: ribbed, coloured, exotic.

*For her added pleasure....*

Finally he had them in his grasp! Hayden glanced left, right, left. Only the usual old folk—grey, misty-eyed, desiccated ghosts. No-one had seen him, fewer cared. Someone dangling oranges in distended fishnet stockings shambled by.

Now, to get out of here....

The self-service checkouts were free, pococurante, entrancing. Subtle, too artful descendants of pinball machines—spurned by the local ghosts: a superior race. ‘Thank you for shopping at...’ They whispered to Hayden as if kith to kin:

*Do it with me....*

The condoms nestled warmly in his palm. Swiftly, Hayden swiped them past one machine’s visage. Paying with cash (as if that somehow excused it) the tiny, tinkling piece of silver returned to him—a money comma—was his change. Grisly pensioners, today’s newspaper tucked under their arms, busily adjusted their flesh-coloured hearing aids. The fish-netted limbs of the Valencias knocked knees, bruisingly. Hayden wondered: Why hadn’t he simply swamped the purchase of the condoms in the main, weekly shop? Amongst a hundred other, innocuous things, he could have bought them almost without admitting it to himself.

Certainly many men had gone through what Hayden was going through now. Still, as he sat in the 4WD indistinguishable from all the others that brayed around the Springvale Primary School carpark at drop-off and pick-up times, his hand froze in the act of turning the key in the ignition. It was only afterwards, moments afterwards, driving away from the scene, that he shuddered. Shuddered, then recovered. Recovered, as so often, by retreating into memory.

Truth be told, Hayden’s experience with condoms was very limited.... Two things washed up now, as he drove away, both from his school days:

The first memory was of a boy bringing an injured magpie to school in a box that, to tell from the images blazoned upon its sides, had once held bananas from the tropics. In show-and-tell, the boy in question (a curly-haired carrottop) had told the class how he was caring for the magpie in his mother’s laundry. A vet had given it an injection for nothing, he told them. It ate worms. The next day, ‘Bluey’ had brought the box once more, to show the magpie again; but this time smaller, curled up around itself, dead overnight. For many nights afterwards—as the future, fleeing into tomorrow, squeezed itself through sleep’s channel—Hayden had been woken by images of the corpse of the bird in its gaily coloured box, asleep forever amidst the odour of ancient fruit. He recalled this first of all.

The second thing he remembered—as he struggled to keep the shuddering at bay—was the day another boy had brought a single condom to school. He had only worked out afterwards what it was. All the same, Hayden remembered the golden packaging, like the leaf adorning a medieval book, and how it had seemed to share the complexion of the child who owned such a prize exhibit. The boy had been Greek, or Italian... Hayden couldn’t quite remember, didn’t quite know. But he did remember, on that occasion, an out-of-class show-and-tell—no girls allowed—near where the rusty-brown incinerator choked away, continuously but half-heartedly, sending the school’s discards into the blue ether.

‘Put it on,’ the carrottop had said, but the Greek boy could only struggle with himself.

A pack of magpies, Hayden remembered, had screamed with laughter to see it.

Death, sex—the whole damn thing. That was the second thing.



Mr Talon was calmer now, weaving smoothly through the traffic, all shuddering gone. The past is the place where you can take any kind of risk with impunity. The present is another matter entirely, and now he was fully restored to it—time and place re-sealed. In the present with all of its safeguards. In the present, where actions can be relied upon to have consequences, causes to lead to effects.

It was only a few minutes from the supermarket to Hayden's children's school.

He was going to be early; he'd get a better park then, maybe even one in the shade.

This summer, relentless; unbearable. Still that's where he was—in this present, in this summer, in the here and now—along with his children. And only this morning one of them had asked: 'Do we have to treat Mummy differently now?'

And now, arriving, turning in, as a thousand times before.

There were fewer parking spots left than he'd hoped for. Slowly, Hayden revolved his steering wheel, backing into a space half covered by shade. A Eucalypt's trailing leaves gently massaged the scalp of his car as he manoeuvred himself in, straightened himself up. He checked his watch: five minutes to wait.

Time might as well pass here.

The news was on someone's radio. Only this morning, this Melbourne summer—relentless, lung-choking, infernal—had destroyed a dozen houses whose clinging to the fringes of suburbia had provided no redemption. No in-between states either: dwellings which had burnt to the ground darkly rebuked their uprightly unscathed neighbours. Fire does not love one's neighbour as one's self.

Hayden thought of the smoulderings and seethings of playground rumour. How it bypassed some entirely, consumed others outright, flared up without warning.

He hated those who, seeing him, blinked as if to wash away the sight of him. He hated the way bodies curled up and shrank, shrank to dust, as if by fire.

Some pre-schoolers, this moment, were passing by his car, trailed by their parents:

'Caught you, you're it!'

'No, you're it!'

Hayden's own kids were speedy, athletic—always catching, rarely caught. Rarely it.

Was he it? What others thought he was? That? Fuck it all!

Beneath the trailing Eucalypt, Hayden waited for the bell to finish sounding, before abandoning his car.

He saw them as they saw him. Together, bursting forth from between the portables—his kids—coming at him in a rush of an almost overwhelming pureness of themselves, of who they were. Such familiarity was sometimes almost too much for Hayden to bear. Even worse, the shock of what he had created.

‘Dad,’ his son began.

‘Yes,’ answered Hayden.

‘Why are you you?’

Mr Talon indeed....

Mrs Talon, Tara, thinking it for the best, had moved out a few weeks back—literally moved to higher ground. Hayden had told the kids: ‘It will let her be herself.’ She’d chosen to stay at her mother’s place, on the outskirts of the city—almost an hour away, still nowhere near the fires. The house looked east though, towards where the fires were burning—even more distantly, perhaps, than they seemed. East also towards the dawn, out of which the sun had scowled for weeks.

Scowled, Hayden smiled to himself, was exactly the right word. Still, the brief period of cool, just before dawn, was like an endlessly renewed promise of forgiveness.

Each morning, as he woke up, Hayden thought of his wife waking up to such a dawn. He thought of her looking east towards the sun, rather than into his eyes of blue and, nowadays, of flecks of a darker colour. He had loved, in the past, to watch her waking up—before it all became too unbearable. To see her eyes open into his, the reflections of his eyes in hers—the seeing of what saw.

His wife, the mother of their monsters—also, the period of coolness, of calm, of diminishing darkness, which comes just before the dawn.

‘Who’s up for an icy-pole?’

‘Me!’

‘Me!’

He would have the kids tonight, Friday night, and then tomorrow he’d take them to see Tara. They could stay over too—no need for the sleepover sitter. That way, he’d see them again only on Sunday. Tara as well, see her.

That evening, with memory of today’s adventures fading fast, Hayden secreted the packet of condoms in a place where he knew his kids would never stumble across them. The upshot: a one-sided, pre-bedtime conceit—a game unimaginable without the unwitting, artless comings and goings of a son and daughter less loved than few: warmer, cooler, warmer, warmer, warmer, burning, burning, on fire! ‘Come and give your dad a kiss.’ Hayden had the condoms on his person, where his kids would never find them. Finally, at 8 pm, he hugged them one last time and packed them off to bed.

Morning. Saturday morning. The day.

Tara and Hayden had been good, they told themselves, at keeping from the kids this unimaginable thing that had happened, with Tara's mother a willing accomplice. Late that afternoon, she had gathered the kids to herself, like one of the clucky hens that pecked up and down the thin strip of lawn that made her house seem to be wearing a Fijian skirt. Gathered up, they'd all waved Hayden off together.

She knew what he was going through. She wouldn't judge.

As he drove back to his empty home, Hayden felt strangely free, more alive, almost, than any man has a right to feel alive. He drove fast, recklessly, riskily. Without the kids, the place was almost unrecognisable. He shuddered.

What a man has done, and what a man will do, meet in everything that he does in the present moment.

The present is where everything begins. It was Saturday night. Hayden showered, got changed, and drove off again—recklessly at first, but then, as he neared his destination on the far side of town from his mother-in-law's, more carefully, more calmly. Occasionally, even at this distance, the fires flickered in his rear-vision mirror. Sodom and Gomorrah, winking out in the distance.

He parked outside a single-fronted, red-brick terrace, with flowery curtains in each window; slowly, deliberately, he squeezed tight against the kerb.

There'd been a change earlier in the day. Hayden felt cleansed by the cool, softly flowing, evening air.

Cicely was waiting for him, Sis.

Perhaps tomorrow, perhaps on Sunday, he and his wife.... No, he had to let that go.

So strange, this separation between them when they should have been at their closest. He remembered the oncologist's words. 'On a more personal note....'

*For her added pleasure....*

Cancer, eh?

Hayden felt more alive than ever before. More alive than any man had a right to.

Sis was waiting for him, Cicely.

# Les Wicks

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## Face-to-face

So I have visited him again  
84, a great shipwreck of a life, he's  
not going out he's  
waiting for the sea to come to him.

This engineer burnt all his plans.  
That last winter, the cold snap that  
kick in the guts, that  
venal torture of god just  
breaks down the everything of us in preparation  
for the flensing gates of glory.  
His fireplace is still lit even in November.

He thinks I babble nonsense, I try  
to put it all down to music  
but the angels have gnawed the timber  
& my life inside a double bass  
has been condemned by critics & builders alike.

There is neither a queue, nor a clue.  
I add my sheet music to the fire.  
Beside an old man  
I lie about warmth while  
down south beach towels flap like flags.  
An armada of youth calls to a rising ocean.

# Emmanuel Chika

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## A New Nigeria

On the 15th of March 2055, a new movement called THE CREATIVE KID'S CLUB was formed by a group of child prodigies. The movement consisted of Dele the music genius who at the young age of seven was a two times Grammy nominee for his outstanding contribution to music production. There was also Okafor the young business mogul who made great a fortune at the age of six from his e-commerce website. Finally, there was Rashid the leader of the others who was thrust into fame at the age of eleven, after he started a vision for empowering creative children from his father's garage and built it into a multi-million naira empire with over fifty thousand beneficiaries. According to the news, his success is largely rooted in an uncanny understanding of the human psyche, a near perfect eloquence and an outstanding genius in the area of marketing.

But they had one major obstacle to this dream and ironically it came in the form of Rashid's twin brother Azeez.

Rashid who came from a very religious Islamic family, never really had much interest in religion. His passion on the other hand, has always been towards innovation and change. As a young child, his room was never in the same state for more than a day, he was obsessed with the idea of anything new and always curious about everything around him, his friends were always the most gifted and talented and he treated every one of them like a mystery that needs to be unraveled.

It was no surprise to those close to him when at the age of nine after discovering that all his talented and gifted friends relied greatly on him because of his unique eloquence and people skill, he decided to start a club for creative kids.

What started as a young kid's attempt to inspire and bring the best out of his friends grew miraculously into the biggest frenzy the nation of Nigeria has witnessed in more than a decade.

Rashid's twin brother on the other hand carried the family religion with such fervor than was convenient for everyone around him; he was so vast in the extreme part of the religion and so informed in her historical dramas that no one could question his knowledge on any subject.

But what no one expected was his decision to start a counter club named after a famed religious sect that caused much death some decades ago.

His new club BOKO HARAM like his brother's gained instant publicity but for a different reason, everyone was curious as to why a little kid of his age would venture into such violent pursuit while his twin brother was busy trying to make the world a better place.

The final clash came when Rashid submitted a proposal to the government for permission to build a mega structure as has always been his dream for kids with special talents to feel at home among themselves.

Azeez quickly launched a counter campaign against that, claiming it is a historical Islamic site and should not be desecrated with scientific impurities, he rallied a Calvary of extreme religious leaders who shared his extreme thoughts and protests were made day and night even as far as subtle attacks on members of the creative kid's club.

Then on the 25th of march that year, both group agreed to meet and sort out their differences and what started as mere sibling rivalry grew into intense hate, the next months witnessed a rise in violence and social media attacks, schools had to close down because kids were attacking other kids suspected to be members of the creative kid's club.

This continued for years until February 14th 2058.

Rashid woke up suddenly early in the morning and walked the length of a very long street till he got to the camp of his brother's now very notorious club, quietly with a disturbing sense of purpose and a calm look of certainty he brought out a stack of books from his back pack, poured fuel on and then and proceeded to stand right in the middle of the flame with just three words coming out repeatedly from his mouth: FAMILY AND LOVE.

When Azeez saw this, he rushed from inside his camp and jumped right in the heat of the fire to save his burning sibling.

What started as a budding war ended in a merger that has led to one of the greatest changes in Nigeria.

# Ian C. Smith

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## We Talked

In the old quarter, the medieval city stretched below,  
cathedral bells tolling the hours of the night  
behind the massive doors, our voices an incantation,  
not bothered by a cold wind blowing through us,  
strains of a cello sombre from an upstairs window.

An avalanche of words sharing secrets *sotto voce*,  
in our shuttered café's susurrus, spoon-tinkle,  
leaning towards each other, hands joining in,  
odour of coffee, forking a diet disaster,  
darker inside, the bright world bustling outside.

On phones reducing in size, years dog-trotting away,  
fingers curling around flex, gazing at walls,  
out windows, then traffic, rain, the park,  
at a memory of stars, changing hands, ears,  
linked by language, giving news, cheered, shriven.

At the coast, calmed by the horizon's certainty,  
on towels, a white ferry seductive on the blue sea  
as we spilled the gossip on our workaday weeks  
exposing wan skin to the breeze, restorative sun,  
easing into summer, squeezed into old swimmers.

When I drifted off by the hearth, book splayed,  
then woke with a sudden shiver, my flame low,  
adjusting glasses, hearing our voices mind-echo,  
heart a trapped moth, lips just moving, telling you,  
remembering your raucous chuckle's warmth.

# Wesley Straton

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## Calling Long Distance

I admit that I have given up  
trying to calculate the difference:  
a day ahead, six hours behind,  
spring forward, fall back.

Here even the constellations  
are unorthodox, though same as ever  
I only know the one by name—  
I've merely traded in the bear remembered  
from Calamine-scented camping trips  
and visits to the planetarium  
for a symbol on a much-contested flag.  
The Dipper for the Southern Cross—  
it isn't poetry, but it has a certain cadence  
that strikes me as significant.

Though perhaps I'm searching again  
for meaning in empty things,  
in words that hold no other words  
within them—hollow dolls  
mistaken for Matryoshka.

Like interrogating Hemingway  
for theme, expecting metaphors  
nesting inside of all that brash  
and forthright masculinity.  
Only more so; even the straightest  
of sentences at least is trying  
to tell a story. Stars are not  
letters, or symbols, or Russian dolls—  
just distant glints of alien daylight,  
bullet holes in a long-suffering sky.

(The sky itself, I ought to mention,  
is different too: the ozone scraped away  
like flour from a counter top,  
and even in winter—July, not January—  
I burn as soon as I hit sunshine.)



So I'm sorry if I woke you, but no,  
I don't have any idea what time it is  
in California, because the world here  
describes itself in idioms I've never heard  
and an alphabet I've yet to learn to read.

## Bodies

This is my body. You might recall the way it used to disappear  
into your arms, melt into your chest on my more sleepless nights.  
Remember? I would unroll myself like a map,  
drape over you like a shroud, in hopes that I might forget myself  
for long enough to find respite. I never found it easy,  
but you seem to have forgotten me already.

You never loved me, no, but I know you liked me—  
I have the credit card receipts to prove it. I suppose you liked  
the shape of me: the teardrop of my torso, the length of leg.  
I remember glimpses of delight, glimmers of the two of us alone  
in a dark bar, your calluses burning runs into my stockings,  
the taste of wine passed from one mouth to the other.

Your body? Well, I suppose I was in love with it. The surety  
of your chest, the solidity of shoulders. It was primitive at best,  
a yearning for strength and breadth that I stretched to adoration.  
I wish I'd loved you—the way my heart aches now  
would have been worth it—but I was a body, and you were a body,  
and for all the good it did we may as well have been corpses.

# Peycho Kanev

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## Enigma

During the snowstorm we were  
listening to some good music and  
drank good wine.  
The music rose to the ceiling,  
while the snow was falling outside;  
yellow streetlamps in the snow-piled lane  
tried to grasp the winter.  
Leafless trees near the house, silent, trembling  
in the icy wind.  
And their transparent shadows  
on the snow making strange figures which  
we still can't fully understand.

# Kate North

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## Pope Penis IX

We took a small apartment in a twisted street off the Campo de' Fiori. It was August and we threw ourselves into the crowds and churches as if they were spa pools. You became proficient at ordering bread from the local bakery and I secured a regular perch at a café on the edge of the square. I enjoyed being spoken to in Italian on account of my dark hair and olive skin.

You divided our stay into segments organised by your map of Rome. Two days for the Vatican side of the Tiber, a day taking in the Spanish Steps then shopping, a day at the Coliseum and so on.

One unplanned day of rest was forced upon us because of a huge downpour of rain that lasted the whole day. We were supposed to be going to the Vatican. Instead, I read an entire book on our bed as the rain beat outside and cooled the city. You worked your way through the Bumper Crossword Book. Then you had dashed to the market and picked up ingredients that could be turned into dinner with only the assistance of a steak knife from Ikea, a plastic mixing bowl and a spatula. The house we were staying in was beautiful, but ill equipped.

When we arrived we found the kitchen and bathroom in the basement. This hadn't been mentioned on the website. The blurb had implied the apartment was on one floor. Descending the stairs, it felt as though we were spiralling back in time. With each step layers of the past revealed themselves: recently plastered walls, down past large hunks of rock, then a stratum of terracotta containing fragments of crockery. I remember staring up towards the cobblestones through the ventilation grill in the ceiling of our kitchen grotto. You were looking through the cupboards 'we only have one glass, what about wine?'

In the bathroom I was annoyed to notice that we had not been provided with any toilet paper, not even a few sheets to tide us over until we found a Spar. I scanned the room as I sat and saw a hand-written notice on A4 paper taped to the back of the door. It was written in English and Italian and read:

- \* Please do not flush sanitary wear down the toilet system.
- \* Do not flush water in toilet and flush water through taps in sinks at the same opportunity.
- \* In all times never use more than three electrical items including lights in ceilings, cooking oven, air conditionings and humidityfier.
- \* Do not turn off humidityfier in basement EVER because of damp.

I called to you but was drowned out by a huge bang followed by a blackout.

'What's happened?'

'We've blown a fuse,'

I stood up in the dark. Then I took a cigarette lighter from my jeans' pocket and flipped it on. Using the flame I made my way to you over by the sink. Your hair glowed orange at the fringes.

'You turned the oven on.'

'Like that's a weird thing to do in a kitchen?'

We stayed local that night. We started off with few drinks. They were served with cute little snacks like mini bruschetta and small cubes of ham with olives.

We found a family trattoria that had tables outside just off the square. A waiter came and gave us menus and we chatted about what to have. We decided to only have Cannelloni starters because of all the aperitivo we had already eaten. We were on a side street that led to another square, though not one as bustling as the Campo de' Fiori. From our view this square looked more formal. There was a municipal palazzo with Italian and EU flags dominating one end of it. We could see a huge fountain right in the middle of the cobbles. It was the largest fountain I had seen to date. It reminded me of when my mother moved house and didn't measure before ordering new furniture. She ordered a too-big coffee table that filled most of the lounge and it had to be sent back to the shop. It was an enormous wicker thing with an oval glass surface. In the days she waited for it to be picked up she had to remove the glass and lean it against a wall in the dining room. Then, when walking through the lounge, she had to hop into the wicker table frame and out of it again in order to reach the other rooms. This fountain was just as ridiculous. It was a pool-sized bathtub with two smaller tiers of bathtubs stacked above it and shoots of water arcing from sprinklers on the top. Teenagers hung around the base of it, some sitting on the edge of the tub, a few smoking or drinking beers. There were boys on skateboards also, practicing jumps and spins.

When the waiter came back to take our drinks order we asked for a litre of red wine. He raised an eyebrow as he scribbled on his pad before heading inside.

'How much is a litre?'

'More than a pint.'

'Is it more than a bottle?'

'I suppose,' and you smiled at me like you had stolen strawberry laces from the corner shop.

The waiter came out with our vat of wine and we ordered Cannelloni il primo.

'Finito?' he asked, 'That is it?'

'Si signor, grazie.'

He raised his eyebrow again while scribbling.

The food was lovely and we ate it slowly while watching the boys by the fountain and talking about our plans. I was really excited about the Vatican. I had read that the corridors of art stretched over seven miles and I was talking about returning before we had even visited for the

first time. You really wanted to see The School of Athens and I was looking forward to the Sistine Chapel.

We finished eating and poured more wine. It was certainly too much and it didn't look like we would finish it. The waiter came out and as he cleared the plates away you hiccupped.

'Too much drink, not enough eat,' he said.

He was in his fifties with greying hair but his eyebrows and moustache were still black.

'You will not live long,' he said then gave a big smile, his moustache wobbling across his lip. As he laughed and shuffled off you topped up our wine glasses to make a point.

'You won't finish that.'

'I know.'

He came back out with the dessert menus and put them in front of us. Then he looked at you and placed his hand on your shoulder.

'You will die young,' he said, and laughed again, this time a deep rolling laugh.

'Let's just ask for the bill,' you said when he had gone.

As we were getting our money together I tried to shuffle my chair forward but couldn't. I looked down and saw that one of the chair legs was stuck in a hole between cobbles. You took the money from me and placed it on the saucer with the bill.

In order to stand up I needed to push my chair back from the table and I couldn't. You came over to help me and I felt really stupid. The chair leg was wedged stuck and I was rocking my weight from side to side in an effort to release it. You were still hiccupping and started to get the giggles.

The waiter came back out and saw us struggling. He rushed over and placed both of his hands on top of his head.

'Too much drink, not enough eat,' he said again. Then an old lady came out of the restaurant and headed towards us. She had an apron tied around her waist and chubby little arms covered in flour. You stepped back. The waiter took me by one arm and the old lady by the other. They pulled me up and my chair released from the cobbles. You pulled it from behind me then the waiter and the old lady held me until I steadied.

'That was embarrassing,' I said, as we walked off towards the piazza with the bathtub fountain. When we turned into the space it was much larger than we had thought. There were actually two fountains placed at either end of the piazza and they were identical to each other.

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At the Vatican we opted for a tour. It was a good idea because the tour guide knew where everything was and we got to see all of the important things in one go. Without a tour it would have taken us weeks to negotiate the endless corridors. Our guide was pleasant and chirpy, an American history of art student. We didn't always listen to her on the headset but dipped in and out of her commentary instead.

Under The School of Athens our tour merged with another. The small room filled quickly as our separate groups poured in. The guides nodded at each other and smiled while rolling their eyes. Then, in sync, they both resumed their talks about the much-anticipated fresco. It was quite a clatter as our guide charged on and her colleague clipped away in German, occasionally retreating to French.

There was an irritating section when we thought we might leave the tour. It was on a roof-terrace with some of the few contemporary works of art at the museum. There is a very nice plated globe and there are topiary bushes in pots. Our guide asked us to sit on some steps with people from another tour while she went and spoke to the other guide. They whispered with their backs to us. We were to be talked through the ceiling of the Sistine chapel before we entered it. It made sense because the chapel would be so busy and noisy. After a while the guides came and stood in front of us, introduced each other and then started on a well-rehearsed patter about the details of the frescoes and what we should look out for when we went in. They cracked a few naff jokes about mothers-in-law that made you groan. Lots of people laughed at them and I became conscious that we looked grumpy. I couldn't help it though, even when I tried to do a fake smile, I had read all about the bloody frescoes in detail. In fact, that is why we were there, to see the stuff we had read about, like The School of Athens, which you love. We wanted to look at the largest collection of art in the world, much of it stolen. I knew that Michael Angelo's female figures had the physiques of males because male models were easier to source in the Vatican, or because he was gay and that is what he preferred to paint, depending on which view you took. I knew that he depicted the Pope's Master of Ceremonies with donkey ears in The Last Judgement because he had criticised the presence of nudes in the scene. I knew that God's arse appears in the panel showing the creation of the Sun and the Moon. I did not want our precious holiday to be wasted listening to crap jokes. I was on the cusp of standing up and walking off when the talk came to an end and we were led out towards the chapel.

We did learn some interesting things from the tour. My favourite fact involved Pope Pius IX and the missing penises. We already knew the reason that so many Vatican statues and paintings have missing or fig-leaf covered members. Pius IX decreed they be chopped off or covered up on grounds of decency. What we didn't know was that many of the removed penises were kept in storage. Even better than stored knobs is the detail that the Vatican has appointed a priest in charge of looking after them and matching them up. There is much debate about whether they should be reunited with their bodies of origin or just catalogued and boxed with their former associations noted. What would the priest be called? Father Cock-sorter? Cardinal of the Phalluses?

That night over pizza and half a litre of wine we wondered if Pius had a small penis and was envious.

'But most statues have tiny ones,' you said.

'Maybe his was even smaller, like a cornichon?'

‘Or, maybe he had a really massive one and was fed up of the little ones being trendy.’

Then we discussed that documentary we had seen about a man with a huge penis. He had something called elephantiasis and it just wouldn’t stop swelling up. He had to carry it around on a trolley wheeled out in front of him when he walked about. We couldn’t remember if they chopped it off or if he just died in the end. It was really sad and we both cried when the credits rolled up. I wrote down in my notebook to google it when I got back home, to find out if he was still alive. And then I also made a note to google Pope Pius IX, to see if he had elephantiasis.

# D. A. Hosek

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## Snowman Tracks

I had a dream last night  
That I was in a Peanuts cartoon  
And Linus and I were making snowman tracks.

What this involved was that  
We sat on a pair of skis  
And held a drumstick with a snowball on each end.  
As we slid along on the skis  
We would turn the drumstick around  
Making a series of impressions in the snow.

While we were doing this  
There was beautiful sad music playing  
In the background  
And I remember thinking,  
“What strange music for a Peanuts cartoon.  
It’s so melancholy  
And expressive of loss.’

Eventually we ran out of sidewalk  
And ended up on the street  
In front of an elderly lady’s house.  
We thought it would be nice  
To make snowman tracks for her.

She came out to watch us.

I’m not entirely sure,  
But I think she might have died  
Years earlier.  
But there she was, on her porch.  
And at the end of the street  
There was our dog, Fayla.  
Fayla, who had died,  
She too was alive.

Fayla came running up to us.  
We weren’t afraid of Fayla.  
We were happy.  
We embraced Fayla in our arms.  
Nothing had ever felt so wonderful.



And I can't help but imagine that somehow  
Making snowman tracks  
Brought back the people  
And things that we'd lost.

Should I wonder  
What it means  
That I've never had a dog  
Or that the old lady  
Lived in a house that looked like none I'd ever lived near  
And looked like no one I've ever known.

But I know that there was this beautiful sad music  
While we were making snowman tracks.

# Author biographies

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## Ivy Alvarez

Ivy Alvarez's latest poetry collection is *The Everyday English Dictionary* (Paekakariki Press, 2016). Previous collections include *Hollywood Starlet* (dancing girl press, 2015) and *Disturbance* (Seren, 2013). She lives in New Zealand. [www.ivyalvarez.com](http://www.ivyalvarez.com)

## Eugen Bacon

Eugen Bacon studied at Maritime Campus, Greenwich University, less than two minutes' walk from The Royal Observatory of the Greenwich Meridian. Her arty muse fostered within the baroque setting of the Old Royal Naval College, Eugen found herself a computer postgraduate mentally re-engineered into creative writing. She has finished a masters and PhD in writing. Eugen has published over 50 short stories and creative articles, and has recently completed a creative non-fiction book and a literary speculative novel. Her short story 'A puzzle piece' was shortlisted in the Lightship Publishing (UK) international short story prize 2013 and is published in Lightship Anthology 3. Eugen's work is published in *New Writing*, *The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*.

## Emmanuel Chika

Emmanuel Chika Prince is a graduate of the University of Benin in Nigeria with a BSc in Industrial mathematics. He is a passionate writer who has won both local and international awards. He has experience in blogging, content writing, freelance writing, and other creative aspects of writing. When he is not writing, he likes to play the piano, play chess and produce music on PRO tools.

## Jessica Clements

Jessica Clements studied English at the University of Adelaide. Her work has appeared in magazines including *21D*, *Wet Ink*, and the anthology, *Breaking Beauty*, published by MidnightSun.

## Harriet Cunningham

Harriet Cunningham is a freelance writer, journalist and musician best known as classical music critic for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. She is currently studying for a DCA at the University of Technology, Sydney, writing a collection of short stories inspired by the archives of Dartington International Summer School of Music. In a previous life she was a copywriter, arts administrator and arts marketing expert and has been known to play the violin.

## D. A Hosek

D. A. Hosek is a graduate of the MFA program at the University of Tampa. His fiction has appeared in *Headlands*, *The Southampton Review*, *MonkeyBicycle*, *Every Day Fiction* and *The Journal of Microliterature*.

## Andy Jackson

Andy Jackson's poetry collection *Among the Regulars* (papertiger 2010) was shortlisted for the Kenneth Slessor Prize. He won the Whitmore Press Manuscript Prize with *the thin bridge*, published in 2014, and his latest collection is *Immune Systems* (Transit Lounge 2015). He writes about poetry and bodily difference at [amongtheregulars.wordpress.com](http://amongtheregulars.wordpress.com)

### Daniel Juckes

Daniel Juckes is a creative writer and PhD candidate from Curtin University, Western Australia. His writing has been published in *Australian Book Review* and *Westerly: New Creative*. His research interests include Thing Theory, nostalgia, and family memoir. His current creative work-in-progress is a family history/memoir inspired by heirlooms and ephemera.

### Peycho Kanev

Peycho Kanev is the author of four poetry collections and two chapbooks, published in USA and Europe. He has won several European awards for his poetry and was nominated for the Pushcart Award and Best of the Net. His poems have appeared in many literary magazines, such as *Poetry Quarterly*, *Evergreen Review*, *Front Porch Review*, *Hawaii Review*, *Barrow Street*, *Sheepshead Review*, *Off the Coast*, *The Adirondack Review*, *Sierra Nevada Review*, *The Cleveland Review* and many others.

### Shari Kocher

Shari Kocher is the author of *The Non-Sequitur of Snow* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2015). She holds a PhD from Melbourne University and currently works as a freelance editor, scholar and poet. <http://www.carapacedreaming.wordpress.com>

### Margarita Korenblium

Margarita Korenblium is a 26-year-old Sydneysider of Eastern European extraction.

### Allan Lake

A collection of Allan Lake's poems, *Sand in the Sole*, was published in 2014. His mega-poem won the Elwood Poetry Prize in 2015 (and will soon become an installation at St Kilda Town Hall Gallery). Earlier this year he was published in *Plumwood Mountain Journal* and the previous *Meniscus*, among others.

### Robyn Lance

Robyn Lance was a participant in Australian Poetry/ACT Writers Centre Masterclass 2016.

### Su-Yee Lin

Su-Yee Lin is a writer from New York with degrees from Brown University and the MFA program at UMass Amherst. Her work has been published in *The Offing*, *The Freeman*, *Electric Literature*, *Fairy Tale Review*, *Interfictions*, and elsewhere. She was a 2012 Fulbright Fellow in China and a 2014 fellow at The Center for Fiction in NYC.

### Mark Mahemoff

Mark Mahemoff has been writing poetry for close to 30 years. His interests range from free verse to found poetry to sestinas and other forms. He has published three books of poetry. A new book entitled, *Recollecting Light* will be published by Ginninderra Press later this year.

### Kristine Ong Muslim

Kristine Ong Muslim is the author of seven books of fiction and poetry, the most recent being the short story collections *Age of Blight* (Unnamed Press, 2016) and *Butterfly Dream* (Snuggly Books, 2016). Her poems have been published in such magazines as *Boston Review*, *New Welsh Review*, and *Southword*.

### Kate North

Kate North is from Cardiff where she lives. She writes poetry and fiction. Her novel *Eva Shell*, was published in 2008 and her poetry collection *Bistro* in 2012. She teaches creative writing at Cardiff Metropolitan University.

### Jane Palmer

Jane has undertaken ethnographic research in Indonesia and regional Australia, and worked for several years in northern Australia with Indigenous communities as an architect and project manager. Her current work focuses on storytelling by community members in order to explore the processes of trauma, grief, resilience and adaptation. She has published in the areas of ethics, fieldwork methodologies, futures studies and climate change adaptation. She has also participated in creative writing groups with the Hunter Writers Centre, NSW.

### Sarah Penwarden

Sarah Penwarden lives in Auckland, where she works as a counsellor educator. She is studying for a doctorate at the University of Waikato on a topic that brings together her interest in grief and poetry. She has had poems published in *Poetry New Zealand* and *Meniscus*, poems and short stories published in *takahē*, and a short story broadcast on Radio New Zealand. She also writes short stories and poetry for children and has had both forms published in *The School Journal*.

### Julia Prendergast

Julia Prendergast has a PhD in Writing and Literature. Julia is a short fiction addict. Her short stories have been longlisted, shortlisted and published: *Lightship Anthology 2* (UK), *Glimmer Train* (US), Séan Ó Faoláin Competition, Munster Literature Centre (Cork City, Ireland), *Australian Book Review* Elizabeth Jolley Prize, Josephine Ulrick Prize. Julia's work is forthcoming in *Review of Australian Fiction* and *Australian Short Stories*. Julia's theoretical work has been published: *TEXT*, *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* (UK), *Current Narratives*, *Testimony Witness Authority: The Politics and Poetics of Experience* (UK).

### Kathy Preston

Kathy was a participant in Australian Poetry/ACT Writers Centre Masterclass 2016.

### Vaughan Rapatahana

Vaughan Rapatahana, a Maori, commutes between three countries, although now spends more time in Aotearoa than Hong Kong and Philippines. Published widely across a range of genres, for example on Colin Wilson in *Philosophy Now* (England, 2016); a series of commentaries on New Zealand poetry in *Jacket 2* (University of Pennsylvania, 2015-2016); a collection of poetry entitled *Atonement*, jointly published in Macao and Hong Kong (2015) and separately in Philippines (2016); a co-edited follow-up to English Language as Hydra entitled *Why English? Confronting the Hydra*, (Multilingual Matters, 2016).

### Sandra Renew

Sandra Renew was a participant in Australian Poetry/ACT Writers Centre Masterclass 2016. Her collection *Who sleeps at night* will be published by Ginninderra Press in December 2016. [sandrarenew.wordpress.com](http://sandrarenew.wordpress.com)

### Andrew Gordon Rogers

Andrew Gordon Rogers' work has appeared in *Kiosk*, *The Houston Literary Review*, *Commonthought Magazine*, *Counterexample Poetics* and *First Stop Fiction*. He graduated from the University of Kansas with a BA in Creative Writing and currently resides in the Kansas City metro area where he is currently working on a novel and two collections of poems.

### Ian C. Smith

Ian C Smith's work has appeared in: *Australian Book Review*, *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Cream City Review*, *New Contrast*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *The Stony Thursday Book*, and *Two-Thirds North*. His seventh book is *wonder sadness madness joy*, Ginninderra (Port Adelaide). He lives in the Gippsland Lakes area of Victoria, Australia.

### Elizabeth Smither

Elizabeth Smither was head judge for University of Canberra Vice-Chancellor's International Poetry Prize 2015, and poet in residence at the Poetry on the Move Festival. The poems published in this issue of *Meniscus* were written in response to her experience in Canberra. They won the Sarah Broom prize.

### Martin Stannard

Martin Stannard is a British poet and critic whose work has appeared widely in the UK and USA since the late 1970s. Since 2005 he has lived in China, where he teaches English at university level. His most recent collection of poetry is *Poems For The Young At Heart* (Leaf Press, 2016). The poems published in this issue of *Meniscus* are loose translations – in other words, they are for the most part an attempt to remain close to the spirit of the original, but they allow for a personal digression if the occasion or temptation arises. <http://www.martinstannard.com>

### Wesley Straton

Wesley Straton graduated in 2011 from Amherst College with a BA in Creative Writing and Spanish and has spent the past five years in Australia, New Zealand, and South America, traveling, bartending, and writing. His work has been featured in *The Common* and *Haverthorn Magazine* and he is currently pursuing representation for his first novel.

### Patrick West

Dr Patrick West is a senior lecturer in professional and creative writing at Deakin University, Melbourne. His short story collection, *The World Swimmers*, was published by the International Centre for Landscape and Language, Edith Cowan University, Perth, in 2011. In 2012 Patrick wrote and co-produced the 27-minute fictional-documentary film, *Sisters of the Sun* (directed by Simon Wilmot).

### Les Wicks

Les Wicks has been a guest at most of Australia's literary festivals, toured widely and been published in over 350 newspapers, anthologies and magazines across 24 countries in 12 languages. He runs Meuse press, which focuses on poetry outreach projects. <http://leswicks.tripod.com/lw.htm>

## Annabel Wilson

Annabel Wilson is a writer and educator from Wanaka, New Zealand. Her writing has been published by the *Otago Daily Times*, *Teton Gravity Research*, *NZSkier*, *Meniscus Journal*, *Blackmail Press*, *Critic*, *Debate*, *The Fix* and *Wanaka Sun*. She holds a Masters in Creative Writing through Massey University and is currently living in Wellington where she is working on various creative projects including a feature length play, two short film scripts and a poetry collection.

